



Foucault  
in **Iran**,  
1978-1979

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# **Foucault in Iran, 1978–1979**

**Johann Beukes**



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## Research Justification

In 1978, French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984), possibly the most famous philosopher in Europe at the time, went to Iran as an inexperienced political journalist, controversially reporting on the unfolding revolution, thereby seriously compromising his distinguished reputation in the European intellectual community. Given the revolution's bloody aftermath and its violent theocratic development under Khomeinism, the book attempts to answer two key questions in particular: is Foucault's Iranian expedition simply to be understood as a critical error in judgement, with indeed disastrous consequences for his legacy? And what precisely did Foucault hope to achieve in Iran, explicitly supporting the cause of the revolting masses and effectively isolating himself from the Western liberal tradition?

With these questions as its premise, this book investigates what is often described as an 'open nerve' in the Foucault scholarship by (1) interpreting Foucault's Iran writings, (2) commenting on interpretations of those writings in the scholarship over the past three decades and (3) eventually proposing that Foucault's supposed 'mistake' was in fact a highly philosophical endeavour, yet misinterpreted by the majority of his contemporaries, to some extent by his most noteworthy biographers from the 1990s, as well as several eminent scholars from the more recent Foucault scholarship.

The *main thesis* of the book is that Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution does not point towards a 'mistake', as long as Foucault's Iran writings are interpreted from his own theoretical framework, with specific reference to crucial Foucaultian concepts such as 'present history' and 'political spirituality'.

The *research results are original and contribute to the specific scientific discourse* in that these Foucaultian concepts are disseminated and contextualised by (1) providing a thorough overview of what happened in Iran directly before and after Foucault arrived in Tehran in September 1978; (2) analysing Foucault's reports back to France, in a detailed fashion; (3) offering a responsible and non-polemical synopsis of the scholarly interpretations, however reluctant and scarce, on this issue over the past three decades; (4) presenting Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution as a deeply philosophical (modern-critical) position that corresponded to his theoretical positions on power, death, madness, contra-Marxism, religion and 'spirituality' in the political sphere, Orientalism and cultural Otherness, all preceding the revolution in Iran; and (5) affording an original interpretation of the legitimacy of Foucault's 'presence' (even in his eventual absence) in Iran from late 1978 to early 1979.

The *methods* applied are literary analysis and historical inquiry.

The author declares that the book represents more than a 50% substantial reworking of the author's previously published material on this or any other topic.

The author declares that every attempt has been made to avoid plagiarism by methodical referencing to all sources, either as quotations or paraphrases, as well as acknowledging sources that were used extensively, with the permission of its authors or publishers, where applicable.

The author confirms that the book presents a scholarly discourse with a target audience consisting of specialists in contemporary philosophy and culture criticism, specifically in Foucault studies.

**Johann Beukes**, Department of Philosophy, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa; and Center for the History of Philosophy and Science, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

'Religion is a political force.'

- Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, 107 -

'I am sure I am not able to provide people with what they expect. I never behave like a prophet - my books don't tell people what to do.

And people often reproach me for not doing so (and maybe they are right), and at the same time they reproach me for behaving like a prophet.'

- Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 11

'I have learned to keep silent sometimes, and also that one has to learn to talk, to be quiet in the proper way: that a person with backgrounds has to have foregrounds, be it for others, be it for oneself. For the foregrounds are necessary to recover from oneself, and to make it possible for others to live with us.'

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 232

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# List of Abbreviations

CEO	Chief Executive Officers
CHPS	Center for the History of Philosophy and Science
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
OCNE	Observe, Control, Normalise and Examine
SAVAK	Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar (Iranian National Organization for Security and Intelligence)



# Preface

In September 1978, French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984), possibly the most famous philosopher in Europe at the time, went to Iran as an inexperienced political journalist, controversially reporting on the unfolding revolution, undeniably compromising and wounding his reputation in the European intellectual community in the process. Given the revolution's bloody aftermath and its violent theocratic development, is Foucault's Iranian expedition, with a second visit to that turbulent country in November 1978, simply to be understood as a critical error in judgement, with disastrous consequences for his legacy? What exactly did Foucault hope to achieve in Iran in 1978 (and in the first months of 1979), explicitly supporting the cause of the revolting masses and effectively isolating himself from the European intellectual community and the Western liberal tradition?

This treatise investigates what can be described as an open nerve in Foucault scholarship by interpreting Foucault's primary texts from this period, commenting on various positions in the scholarship over the past three decades and eventually proposing that Foucault's 'mistake', resulting from his 'self-consciousness' and 'uncertainty', was indeed a highly philosophical endeavour, yet misinterpreted by the majority of his contemporaries, to some extent by his most noteworthy biographers from the 1990s, and by some eminent scholars from the more recent scholarship over the past two decades. The issue of Foucault's involvement in Iran in 1978–1979 is still a relatively unexplored theme in Foucault research and one that is often still bypassed, as the general view seems to be that it was a breathtaking mistake, comparable to Heidegger's notorious flirtation with National Socialism in the early 1930s.

The research background of this work comprises two elaborate articles that I published in 2009 regarding Foucault's involvement

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in the Iranian revolution (Beukes 2009a, 2009b). I found it compulsory to change my position on a number of issues addressed in those articles, in the light of the recent (and crucial) developments in the scholarship (especially with regard to Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's [2016] and Marnia Lazreg's [2017] outstanding works, as well as *Iran Namag* 3[2], *Special Issue on Foucault in Iran*, under editorship of Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi and Ghamari-Tabrizi [2018]). I was in the light of my reading of these recent works able to maintain certain fundamental aspects of my reception of more than a decade ago but felt that I had to rework the bulk of that reception, leading to a more outspoken defence of Foucault's position, a more nuanced contextualisation of the influence of Neoliberalism on Foucault's thought at the time and a subtle polemic engagement with some of Foucault's critics both at the time in France and in later interpretations of his Iran writings.

This is how this book came about. Its objective is to provide a study of a brief historical event in awareness and understanding of its context, with its wider consequences and repercussions, namely Foucault's two short visits to Iran in September and November 1978, intended as a 'journalistic' expedition – yet resulting in a highly idiosyncratic, modern-critical and, at first blush, contra-Enlightened, archaic interpretation of the revolution. The seemingly arbitrary quality of Foucault's visits to Iran does however not only provide a particular focus, but also a dense perspective on a wide arrangement of proximate philosophical considerations and political events, which are addressed here.

The work is not excessively polemic in its style, orientation and approach, neither is it overly critical of Foucault nor of his critics, but rather seeks for a constructive engagement of Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution in fairness and balance. I nevertheless offer sympathetic *Motifforschung* as far as Foucault is concerned, taking a wide spectrum of relevant factors into consideration, and attempt to present a constructive alternative to the condescending critique of Foucault by the majority of his

opponents (and many former friends and allies) at the time and in the decades thereafter. The book in this sense consistently attempts to move beyond the limitations of an ordinary polarising approach. The same approach is hence applied to Foucault's critics, which results in an open-ended engagement, instead of attempting a 'final word' or 'last verdict', thereby not partaking in the dismissive attitudes often visible in contemporary philosophical discourse. In the same vein, I do not turn a blind eye to the limitations in Foucault's evaluation of the situation at the time of the revolution, notably Foucault's 'lack of knowledge' of both Sunni and Shia Islam, but these are presented as explicable shortcomings, and not as fatal flaws in philosophical and personal integrity.

Finally, this work attempts to provide value to the Foucault scholarship on only a few of many possible levels. Disseminating three concepts that are key to understand Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution (Otherness, Present history and Political spirituality), the work progresses by providing a thorough overview of what really did happen in Iran after Foucault arrived in Tehran in September 1978 (and what really did happen was not conforming to the West's idea of progression, but an Iranian idea of progression, on its own terms); analysing Foucault's reports back to France, in a detailed fashion, offering an extensive overview of the interpretations on this issue (however often reluctant and reserved) from the Foucault scholarship over the past three decades; presenting Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution not as a 'mistake' nor as a 'critical error in judgement', but as a deeply philosophical position that corresponds to Foucault's theoretical positions on power, death, madness, uncertainty, spirituality, Orientalism and Otherness, all preceding the revolution in Iran; and finally, by affording a historical overview of Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution, a responsible and non-polemical synopsis of the scholarship's attempts to deal with the issue and an original interpretation and presentation of the legitimacy of Foucault's 'presence' (even in his eventual absence) in Iran from September

1978 to April 1979. In an age where it has become urgent to reinterpret both Shia and Sunni legacies within the context of radicalised Islam, the book argues for a Foucaultian recognition of the 'Orient Other' as nothing more, yet nothing less, than 'An-Other Self'.

The final manuscript of this book was edited during the silent and grey months from March to June 2020, in a world hesitating under the panoptic and deadly gaze of something very old yet very new.

# Introduction

**Keywords:** Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989); *Corriere Della Sera*; Stuart Elden; Michel Foucault (1926–1984); Foucault scholarship; Frédéric Gros; *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair*; *The History of Sexuality*; Iranian revolution (1978–1979).

## ■ Yet again, ‘what is an author?’

Whatever else he may have become and if he indeed became ‘what one is’, Michel Foucault (15 October 1926–25 June 1984) was first and foremost a philosopher and an activist historian of ideas. Since he started publishing his provocative philosophical works in the late 1950s, he always maintained a unique interest in the role of the intellectual as both an analyst and an activist. Foucault moved ideas and his ideas moved the world.

Yet in 1978, events broke out in Iran that stirred up both the world and ideas about the world: these events have proved to be highly consequential for international politics up to this very day. It all began in January 1978, when the first public protests against the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-plotted and United States

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(US)-supported regime of the 'Shah', Mohammad Pahlavi, started to manifest itself. The protesters were quite clear about their intention, namely the establishment of an Islamic Republic, created by the Shia Islamic movement under the leadership of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. The protests continued throughout and grew in intensity during the first half of 1978, forcing the Shah to appeal to President Jimmy Carter for US intervention and aid.

This political opposition was against what it perceived as the repressive and oppressive nature of the Shah's regime and the self-indulgence of the regime's cadres. The protests were also targeting the intense Western economic interests in Iran. The frustration of the protesters exploded in Tehran on 'Black Friday', 08 September 1978, when police opened fire on large crowds, killing a large number of demonstrators. Foucault, having been commissioned by the Italian newspaper, *Corriere Della Sera* (with reprints in the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur*), to visit Iran as some kind of 'political journalist' and write a series of articles on what was now clearly an unfolding revolution, arrived in the country a week after Black Friday.

Foucault was enthusiastic about the developing revolution from the outset. He was particularly interested in the religious quality of the resistance movement and was deeply moved by the sheer will of ordinary Iranians for a fundamental change in politics and political leadership. What Foucault witnessed in the streets of Tehran was for him the affirmation of one of his deepest intellectual convictions, namely that religion is a political force with an inherent potential to challenge established sets of subject-object relations, which is what 'political power' really is – a dynamic he would progressively refer to as 'political spirituality'.

Khomeini was expelled from Iran in October 1978 because of his seemingly dangerous political tactics and took up residence in France. As the protest movement grew in numbers, yet also in a unique Dionysian frenzy, the Shah fled Iran. Khomeini returned on 01 February 1979 to lively crowds, welcoming the Ayatollah as its leader.

Within weeks the true nature of this new leadership became morbidly evident: bitter reprisals and executions of loyalists to the Shah started to take place, most often in public. Foucault was bewildered by this development, yet he refused to substantially amend any of his published analyses of the moral qualities of the Iranian revolution. This refusal reflected an ‘essential dichotomy’ in his thinking, an ‘issue that occupied him for most of his life’ (Oliver 2010:16), as an attempt to answer the critical question posed by the post-war generation who had experienced the German occupation of France and the deprivations of the Second World War: *what determines the kind of life we lead?* (cf. Oliver 2010:15–16). This question also provided impetus to Foucault’s involvement in Iran from September 1978 to April 1979.

According to Beukes (2009a), when Foucault went to Tehran in September 1978, he:

[W]as France’s dominant and most celebrated public intellectual, renowned for his idiosyncratic critique of modernity, carried out through radical dissections of modern institutions that reversed the conventional wisdom about, amongst others, government, prisons, madness and sexuality. (p. 5)

He was at the time quite possibly the most famous philosopher in Europe, having produced stunning and provocative works over and beyond the conventional index of philosophy. This neo-index included madness, unreason, anarchy, language and the order of things, discipline and punishment, delinquency, sexuality as ‘an invention’, *ars erotica* as opposed to *scientia sexualis*, and ‘spirituality’ as a ‘political’ notion. Although he would have been embarrassed to be framed into any sort of statistic, it does serve the enduring legacy of his unique critique of modernity by pointing out that Foucault was, according to the authoritative *Times Higher Education Bulletin* (28 April 2009), the most cited scholar in the humanities in 2007 – and again in 2014 – followed only by Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas and Judith Butler in the philosophy section.

Foucault thus was an influential thinker, precisely because of his fearless originality: in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975) had argued, for instance, that liberal democracy was, in fact, 'a disciplinary society with a ferocious governmentality that punished with less physical severity in order to punish with greater efficiency' (Beukes 2009a:5). Foucault's critical resistance to modernity (Beukes 2009a) suggested that:

[T]he modern institutions we trust to liberate humanity (the state, the clinic, the penal system, the asylum, the self-reforming church and so on) were in fact enslaving us in always reconfigured and deceptive ways, cunningly shifting the focus of discipline from the external to the internal, from our bodies to our souls. His whole oeuvre could be read as a revolt against this governmentality - and he found the perfect context for illustrating that revolt in this actual revolution, one that seemed to despise Western-modern governmentality as much as he did. (p. 5)

Foucault's critical perspectives on modernity, based on his analyses of modern discourses of power, were thoroughly original in many other aspects: he famously postulated that modern power is not only repressive and negative or restrictive but also productive, positive or 'discursive', as he liked to call it (e.g. Foucault 1975:27). 'Power is everywhere; it is pervasive. It crawls through the web of all social, political and economic relations' (Beukes 2009a:5). Power is not merely being exercised 'from above' - being everywhere, it is being exercised (from) everywhere: '[i]n the modern sense, knowledge is power, yet in the Foucaultian sense, power is knowledge' (Beukes 2009a:5).

Foucault's historical studies on the asylum, hospital, school, prison, military and many other modern institutions focused on what he called 'modern technologies of power', which create 'docile bodies'. These technologies of power operate according to a straightforward principle, which in an acronym (Beukes 2009a:5) could be called a principle of 'observe, control, normalise and examine' (OCNE) (Foucault 1975:173). Modernity, therefore, firstly aspires to the panoptical position, the 'single gaze which sees everything constantly' (Foucault 1975:183), by

employing a hierarchical method of observation, as manifested in prisons, army barracks, hospitals, asylums, schools and so forth. What follows is a 'normalising judgement', the postulation of a set of rules that requires continuous observance. Soldiers, mental patients, students and prisoners, for example, internalise these rules. They all are now subject to a 'small penal mechanism' (Beukes 2009a:5). This mechanism 'compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, excludes; in short, it *normalises*' (Foucault 1975:183).

Eventually, the 'examination' follows, by which Foucault indicated an internalised-ritualised process that rewards conformists and penalises non-conformists. In other words, modern power works by gathering knowledge about individuals (such as prisoners or patients), a knowledge through which they are constantly being 'watched' (Foucault [1975] 1995:217). Foucault's crucial point (Beukes 2009a) was that:

[T]he system only really becomes successful once this disciplinary power is enforced not only by the doctor, warden, psychologist, army officer, factory supervisor or teacher but also by the individual subject itself. (p. 5)

This subject has now internalised it as a *necessity*, as a 'ritual', of modern life (Foucault [1975] 1995:217). Modern power aspires in this way to maximum intensity with as little resistance as possible to increase 'the docility of the elements in the system', to keep them quiet and at their place (Foucault [1975] 1995:217).

Initially, Foucault was convinced that there could be no effective challenge to this unitary and disciplinary nature of modern power. Yet, later on in his career, towards the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, nearing the completion of the second and third volumes of his trilogy, *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault began to allow for 'local resistances': because 'power is everywhere, even at the most micro levels of society, points of resistance might be present everywhere in the same power network' (Beukes 2009a:5). Foucault, as will be argued from his Iran writings, would engage the revolution in Iran exactly from this angle of 'local resistance'.

Foucault put his considerable influence behind the Iranian revolution that eventually did establish the totalitarian and violent Islamicist regime of Khomeini. This is an indisputable fact. Foucault's public support of the revolution quite predictably raised the anger of the majority of French intellectuals at the time, especially protagonists of women's liberation and gay rights, especially when it became clear that Khomeini's victory, or final 'triumph', would manifest itself in the public execution of 'homosexuals' and the brutal suppression of human rights in general: much like the young Hegel's enthusiasm for the French revolution, and Martin Heidegger's reckless support for National Socialism, however brief it was, Foucault's support of the Iranian revolution, if not for the Ayatollah himself, seemed to be a gigantic mistake for all who knew and did not know him (Tran 2011:160). At the end of April 1979, Foucault was in deep trouble.

However, and these are still the key questions: should the notions of a 'gigantic mistake', a 'critical error in political and ethical judgement', a 'philosophical folly', an 'intellectual vanity' (Beukes 2009a:2) have the last word on Foucault's clearly controversial 'journalistic' expedition to Iran more than 40 years ago? This was and still is the case for some Foucault scholars, and yet for others, the minority, it simply was and is not that straightforward. Some of his critics argued that Foucault in Iran in 1978 was 'a self-displaced French philosopher, in the wrong place at the wrong time, saying what should not have been said' (Beukes 2009a:1); others, again the minority, argued that he was right where he should have been during the last quarter of 1978, 'reading and writing against the grain, saying against mandarin conventions what Western philosophers since Plato have always been saying: *Things are not what they seem*' (Beukes 2009a:1). This book contextualises itself within the speculative frames of the last conviction.

Two considerations should be noted at the outset: firstly, the expedition to Iran was the closest that Foucault ever

came to doing empirical work, ‘in the field’, as done by journalists. Although he participated in demonstrations in France and Tunisia in the 1960s and 1970s, his commitment to demonstrations was always one of understatement. Foucault could sometimes leave the impression of being opinionated, but he certainly never was a blunt activist. He was a scholar of archives and always most at home in his study and libraries. However, the chance of ‘being a journalist’ marked for him a new ‘search for the world of the empirical, of the concrete event, which opens up in real-time, in all its confusion, complexity and immediacy’ (Lazreg 2017:125). For the first time in a long time, in 1978, the famous philosopher had an opportunity to leave his study, students and libraries, and engage the (for him) ‘other world’, the ‘East’ – twice actually, first Japan in the first months of 1978, and then Iran in September and November of the same year.

Secondly, a decade before going to Japan and Iran, Foucault had lived for two years in Tunisia in a different type of Muslim society: ‘[d]uring May 1968, just like the time of the Algerian War, I was not in France; always a bit lagging, on the margin’.<sup>1</sup> The Tunisian students’ fearlessness and their resistance to a dictatorship made a deep impression on him. However, what Foucault experienced in Iran was different; something was quite unique about the demonstrations in Tehran, in particular: wholly different from Tunisia, an interplay between Islam and politics took place in Tehran, followed by an urgent call for change, made ‘without an apparent ideological blueprint’ (Lazreg 2017:125). What is more, the radically public nature of demonstrations in Iran contradicted Foucault’s established preference for ‘silence as the best form of protest, (as a) a total abstention’.<sup>2</sup> These two considerations indicate that Foucault was a novice and profoundly inexperienced ‘journalist’: the mere experience of being an

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1. *Dits et écrits* II, Foucault (1994:897; cf. Lazreg 2017:125, 152: endnote 15).

2. *Dits et écrits* II, Foucault (1994:670; via Lazreg 2017:126; 152: endnote 16).

empirical commentator on a ‘revolution without ideology’ was completely new to him.

Yet an even more crucial consideration, going back to a famous Foucaultian rhetorical question, always lingers: *what is an author?* (Foucault 1977a:124–126). Foucault (1977a:126–127) in his career consistently problematised the possible hermeneutic significance of authorship, especially with regards to authorial intention. For Foucault, the notion of authorship refers to a function that for him resolved but especially hid many contradictions: we must, according to Foucault, get rid of our habit of exploring an author’s authority and intentions, and rather focus on how the power of discourse restricts both an author and that author’s statements. That is why Foucault never wrote memoirs or an autobiography, and certainly never would have authorised a biography: the author’s subjectivity is just too capricious, changeable and disconcerted, to ever be able to supply any hermeneutical key or basis for such a venture. Famously, he noted: ‘[d]o not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same’ (Foucault in Miller 1993:32), which forms part of Foucault’s *‘Art of Not Being Oneself’* (Robinson 2003:121–139).

So, again, ‘what is an author?’ Just how unsettling authorship really is, is shown in the author’s own transformation in the light of crucial developments in scholarship over the past decade. In 2009, I published two rather elaborate articles on Foucault’s involvement in Iran, which I do not recognise myself as the ‘author’ of.<sup>3</sup> This author has changed, the scholarship has changed, Iran is changing and, even in death, the subject Michel Foucault keeps on shedding his discursive skin. Not even a nuanced designator such as *hamartia* would suffice for what this book now has in mind about Foucault’s involvement in Iran in 1978 and 1979.

In 2009, I employed this classic Aristotelian notion, *hamartia*, signifying a ‘tragic error in judgement with disastrous conse

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3. Beukes (2009a, 2009b); see Lazreg (2017:152: endnotes 5 and 7).

quences', to argue that the scholarship in this sector of Foucault reception in the first decade of the 21st century had arrived at the crossroads: again, was Foucault's involvement in Iran a mistake, or not; and if so, what was (and is) the price to be paid for the so-called 'mistake' he had made? This complex Greek concept, *hamartia*, was used tactically, in a 'Persian' context, at the time: most famously used in Aristotle's *Poetics*, it is often translated as a 'grave mistake' or a 'serious error in judgement'. In Greek, the word is rooted in the notion of 'missing the mark' [hamartanein] and covers a broad semantic spectrum that includes accidents and mistakes with severe consequences – in some of the theologies in the second Testament of the Christian Bible, even *sin*. In Greek tragedy, the concept as an error in judgement or an unwitting mistake is applied to the actions of the protagonist and is central to the plot of the tragedy. In particular, the protagonist may try to achieve a specific goal by making an error in judgement; however, the protagonist instead achieves the opposite, with disastrous consequences. Aristotle (*Poetics* 1453a; see *Poetics* 6.24) famously cited the example of Sophocles' Oedipus, who acted with consistent discipline to prevent the fulfilment of Oracle's prediction that he would kill his father and have sex with his mother, but by his actions he instead caused those very things to happen' (cf. Beukes 2009a:1).

Already then, a decade ago, the simplified rendering of *hamartia* as a tragic flaw in moral composition, or 'sinful' in character, was in terms of a perspective on Foucault's 'mistake', considered as imprecise and misleading (Struck 2004):

The complex nature of Oedipus' *hamartia* is important [...] The Greek term *hamartia*, typically translated as 'a tragic flaw', actually is closer in meaning to a 'mistake' or an 'error', 'failing', rather than an 'innate flaw'. In Aristotle's understanding, all tragic heroes have *hamartia*, but this is not inherent in their characters, for then the audience would lose respect for them and be unable to pity them; likewise, if the hero's failing were entirely accidental and involuntary, the audience would not fear for the hero. Instead, the character's flaw must result from something that is also a central part of their virtue, which goes somewhat awry, usually due to a lack of knowledge. By defining



the notion this way, Aristotle showed that a genuinely tragic hero must have a failing that is neither idiosyncratic nor arbitrary but is somehow more deeply embedded – a kind of human deficiency and human weakness. Oedipus fits this precisely, for his fundamental flaw is his lack of knowledge about his own identity. (p. 10)

*Lack of knowledge and issues concerning identity:* this is the frame in which Foucault's involvement in Iran was situated in the author's reception a decade ago. Up to 2010, some interpretations of Foucault's involvement in Iran considered his lack of knowledge, but pertinently about 'being a journalist' or simply 'being in Iran', as the main factors contributing to what was often described in publications as his 'critical error in judgement' (Miller 1993:305), as the consequence of his 'peculiar Orientalism' (Almond 2004, 2007), as the most 'indecipherable event' in his otherwise illustrious career (Paras 2006:57), and as the main reason for the many problems surrounding this issue in Foucault scholarship – that, as a 'West-essentialising Greek', he did not belong in his other-Oriental posed 'Persia'.

There is, of course, a long tradition of bohemian French intellectuals, chasing 'distant roars of battles' (Lilla 2003:137-158; Miller 1993:306) to sing the praises of revolutionaries in exotic contexts and finding in them the realisation of their intellectual hopes (Yang 2005:D4).

More questions then: was Foucault's involvement in Iran in 1978 and 1979 an embarrassing affirmation of this suspicious tradition? Was Foucault's involvement in Iran therefore a 'folly' and a 'farical and tragic error' that fit into a distinctively French tradition of intellectual 'sycophants' (Broyelle & Broyelle 1979:249), leeching on distant revolutions, as his most eloquent and profoundly compassionate biographer, Miller (1993:309, 315), in the closing chapters of an outstanding monograph felt compelled to affirm? Or did the Iranian revolution rather appeal to some of Foucault's integral philosophical preoccupations – of the spontaneous eruption of resistance to established power, of the exploration of the contemporary disclosed limits of rationality

(Nigro 2005:652–661), of the philosophical appeal of death (Allen 2000:121–130), of (Beukes 2009a):

[7]he dubious nature of discipline, of the enigmatic voices of Otherness, of the violent confrontation with identity, of puzzling labyrinths and dark esoteric corners, of the entropy of madness and hence the mad creativity unleashed by people willing to risk death? (p. 2)

If Foucault was, according to these preoccupations, practising philosophy on his unique terms in Iran, what kind of philosophy was it? Could it be that Foucault’s involvement in Iran should be understood as an investigation into an alternative that was absolutely other to liberal democracy and the nature of ‘political spirituality’ that underlies this alternative? Or, again from the other side of the coin, was Foucault’s search for this kind of alternative indeed gullible and even reckless in the light of Shia Islam’s subsequent, post-1978 developments in Iran and elsewhere, brutal and violent as it unfolded theocratically (and is still unfolding)? (Beukes 2009a):

Did Foucault simply put on record some of the political aspirations of the protesters, or did he really attempt to overturn the unimaginative and antagonistic notions that filled the minds of Western observers who stayed well clear of the events, considering the revolution to be a mere regression to the pre-modern? (p. 2)

Was Foucault with his presence and reports in Iran furthering the established, yet often misunderstood, theme of (not modernised and not Westernised) Otherness in his work? Or was he basically misinformed, becoming nothing less than a misinforming agent himself, simply duped into trying to become a ‘streetwise journalist’, forsaking his intellectual nomenclature and deserving of the taunts of his critics in France, amongst them even veteran leftists and former friends such as Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, who urged him to ‘confess’ his ‘mistake’ by getting involved in the conflict in the first place?<sup>4</sup> Was this a breathtaking mistake,

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4. Broyelle and Broyelle (1979:249); see Foucault’s reaction (1979c:249; cf. Macey 2004:12; O’Farrell 2005:142, 155).

again, on the same scale and not less damaging as Heidegger's short-lived but always disgraceful involvement with National Socialism (Lilla 2003:1-46, 137-158)? Did Foucault really deserve the eulogy at his funeral<sup>5</sup> in 1984 that still lamented 'the mistake we made together?'<sup>6</sup> So many questions, which could perhaps be condensed in a single one: *did Foucault have a flash of insight in Iran – or did he miss the point entirely?*

My 2009 employment of the essentially Western concept *hamartia* to introduce the problems concerning Foucault's involvement in Iran, which at first blush seems to be a wayward, 'Oriental' issue – 'Persian, not Greek' – was an attempt to address these problems as precisely Western in nature, in an attempt firstly to orientate Foucault's two Iran excursions as a problem of Enlightenment, of modernity, of the Occident, with all its palimpsestic, Orientalist consequences; and secondly, to keep alive the crucial tension between Self and Other, Greek and Persia, and West and East. Throughout those two articles, I, therefore, accentuated Foucault's involvement in Iran as essentially modern-critical in orientation, characterised by a crucial impetus of the Self's resolute, yet problematic, 'crossing over to the Other'. This is the strained and tense impression that Foucault's Iran writings are still leaving on this book: Foucault, along the lines of that reading and reception a decade ago, was a 'self-conscious Greek in Persia' (Beukes 2009b:4).

This book thus maintains the notion of Foucault being a 'self-conscious Greek in Persia',<sup>7</sup> but now with a significant shift in

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5. Foucault's friend Jean Daniel, in Eribon (1992:289); cf. Lilla (2003:150), Macey (2004:128) and Mills (2003:19).

6. Even relatively recent works on Foucault's political philosophy choose to bypass the Iran-issue altogether, as in Kelly's (2009) extensive introduction to Foucault's political thought. Foucault's Iranian expedition is not mentioned even once in Kelly's text. This type of omission could be considered a tactical move in many political-theoretical works, with Foucault at its centre, that one could realistically anticipate would have addressed the issue, had the consequences for Foucault's reputation been different, of course.

7. The section 'Yet again, "what is an author?"' represents a substantial reworking of Beukes (2009a:1-3). This article was published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence, according to which permission was granted for reworking.

accentuation: Foucault's philosophical dispositions are in this book handled far more sympathetically than they were in 2009, and this book would be much more outspoken against those reductionist analyses that diminish Foucault's involvement in Iran as a 'mistake'. Of course, and this would be acknowledged throughout, Foucault could have been more definite and more decisive on specific points, but his presence in and his writings from Iran were in line with many of his established theoretical positions about 'political spirituality' and 'Otherness'. Foucault was a philosopher, not a prophet: there was no way he could have foreseen what eventuated from 01 February 1979 onwards in Iran. But what exactly was Foucault trying to achieve in Iran in 1978–1979 as some kind of 'political journalist', explicitly supporting the cause of revolting masses and effectively isolating himself from the European intellectual community and Western liberal tradition? In other words, and this could be an ultimate and very last question: why did Foucault go down this road that in the end left him virtually alone?

This book places itself amongst a number of remarkable contextualisations and analyses of Foucault's involvement in Iran, arguing that the answer is to be found somewhere in the middle of the flash and the void, somewhere in the middle of Foucault's peculiar mixture of naïveté and perceptiveness about the events in Iran in late 1978 and early 1979. However, and in this sense, this book is a staunch defence of the philosophical quest of a 'self-conscious Greek in Persia', and pointing towards that middle ground does not imply a 'mistake'. The book attempts to answer the many questions raised above by argumentatively providing an overview of the most crucial contributions that have been made on this issue in Foucault research, issues which largely had been neglected in the scholarship for four decades. Furthermore, this work endeavours to contribute to and stimulate the debate surrounding the Iran issue by introducing the tense notion of Foucault's 'ethics of Self-discomfort' into this context as a plausible way of broadening our understanding of his involvement in Iran from 1978 to 1979 – as indeed profoundly philosophical. At a time when religion seems more than ever to be inseparable from

politics and Western liberals are (yet again) divided between interventionists and anti-imperialists, Foucault's outlooks on power, revolt, 'Otherness', 'political spirituality' and an 'ethics of Self-discomfort' may prove to be as significant now as they had been in 1978, still holding fundamental consequences for an understanding of Western liberal tradition and its edgy relation to the 'Western Other'.

The biographical details<sup>8</sup> of Foucault's trips to Iran are reasonably well documented.<sup>9</sup> During 1977, Foucault was invited to write a regular column as a special correspondent for the Italian daily *Corriere Della Sera*. Although it was and still is not unusual for European newspapers to solicit reports from prominent intellectuals, Foucault never made clear why he accepted the offer and, especially important, he never indicated clear objectives for the philosophical nature of such an undertaking (Eribon 1992:281; Miller 1993:308). He was indeed rather vague about it (Foucault, cited in Eribon 1992):

The contemporary world is teeming with ideas that spring up, stir around, disappear or reappear, and shake up people and things. This is not something that happens only in intellectual circles or in the universities of Western Europe; it also happens on a world scale, and it happens particularly among minorities that, because of history, have not up to now been in the habit of speaking up or making themselves heard [...] There are more ideas on earth than intellectuals imagine. And these ideas are more active, stronger, more resistant and more passionate than 'politicians' think. We have to be there at the birth of ideas, the bursting outward of their force: not in books expressing them, but in events manifesting this force, in struggles carried on around ideas, for or against them. Ideas do not rule the world. But it is because the world has

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8. See the introductions of Afary and Anderson (2004:2, 2005:69–111), Eribon (1992:281–288), Leezenberg (1998, republished 2004:99–101) and Miller (1993:306–309).

9. Éric Aeschmann's (2018) short but erudite introduction to the whole constellation of problems opened up by Foucault's 'enthusiasm' for the Iranian revolution could be regarded as one of the best condensed introductions to the Iranian theme in recent Foucault scholarship.

ideas (and because it constantly produces them) that it is not passively ruled by those who are its leaders or those who would like to teach it, once and for all, what we must think. This is the direction we want these 'journalistic reports' to take. An analysis of thought will be linked to an analysis of what is happening. Intellectuals will work together with journalists at the point where ideas and events intersect. (p. 282)

This explanation still does not make clear what would be the philosophical nature of that intersection, to what extent an 'intellectual' would have to be developed into a 'journalist'. And this is the foundation of the problem for by far the majority of Foucault scholars, even today, in the sense that they still have no clear indication as to what were Foucault's 'intellectual objectives'. If it is true that lack of knowledge about his own identity is the cause of his presumed mistake, it is precisely at this point – Foucault, the 'journalist in the Orient' or Foucault, the 'philosopher in Paris' – that the complications for many of the established Foucault receptions, in particular, commence. Foucault was indeed unclear about his philosophical intentions: yet it is argued that 'uncertainty' is a philosophical virtue – and not a vice. It is philosophically crucial that Foucault had no precise, concrete objective, that he had 'little knowledge', and that he radiated uncertainty, that he had to engage the problems of 'Otherness' in Iran in an unconventional manner, a style where uncertainty or vagueness should not be considered a deficiency, a mode which is elaborated in the last chapter of this book as an 'ethics of Self-discomfort'.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Foucault's Iran writings from September 1978 to February 1979 were translated into Persian and published in 1998. I am indebted to Karen de Bruin, Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson's preparations and English translations of relevant French texts and their translations, in correspondence to the pertinent passages of *Dits et écrits* as well as the older translations by Betsy Wing in Eribon (1992), and Miller's (1993) and Rée's (2005) own translations. Wherever Foucault is quoted directly in Chapter 6, it is done on the basis of these translations by De Bruin, Afary and Anderson, as well as those by Miller, Rée and Wing, as indicated via Harvard and as per footnote.

## ■ The event of *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair* (2018)

Apart from the conflict-ridden issue on Foucault's involvement in Iran from 1978 to 1979, another rather dividing issue in Foucault research has come to the fore over the past two years. The scholarship is currently at odds with the possibilities regarding the reception of a newly published 'fourth' volume of *The History of Sexuality*: (Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair* [The Confessions of the Flesh], ed. Frédéric Gros 2018). The debate on the legitimacy of this publication in terms of being accepted as an 'authentic' Foucault text would take a central stand in the Foucault scholarship in the years to come. It is not going to be possible to present any Foucault monograph after 2018, on whatever theme in Foucault's work, without some grounding of an author's disposition towards this issue.

Why is this publication, within a year of its release, with two articles already available in English for years and with a full Dutch translation<sup>11</sup> pending, already causing significant disunion amongst Foucault scholars? The answer is deceitfully simple: Foucault made it amply clear, even in the last months before his passing on 25 June 1984, that he strictly forbids any posthumous publications

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11. The article 'The battle for chastity' has been available in English for years in Foucault (1988b), whilst the section 'Maurice Florence' is available in (only) the first edition of the *Cambridge companion to Foucault* and in *Essential Works II. Foucault Cirkel Nederland/België* held a symposium on the reception of the work on 12 December 2019 at the University of Amsterdam, with the second symposium on Dutch translation by Jeanne Holierhoek (*Debekentenissen van het vlees*, Boom Uitgeverij, Amsterdam, 2020) scheduled for 29 May 2020. For an overview of the Dutch reception of the work up to December 2019, see Beukes (2020c), with reference to the contributions by Dorrestijn (2019), Karskens (2019) and Leezenberg (2019); compare Lambrecht's (2019) extensive list of Dutch reviews in the span of less than two years, from February 2018 to November 2019.

of his unfinished works.<sup>12</sup> Foucault was notoriously tiresome in terms of his insistence to edit his works before publication. However, there is another reason why Foucault forbade posthumous publications: the reaction to his work was for him more exciting and spellbinding than the work itself, precisely because he as an ‘author’ is, as far as he was concerned, hermeneutically dissolved, once the text is published. The fact that neither the debate following the publication of a book nor the opportunity to defend himself against his critics (and the list was always long and often distinguished) would be possible, and was unthinkable for Foucault. There are many reports of Foucault taunting those who thought they were writing for the sake of ‘some future interest’. As a ‘philosopher of the present’, undoubtedly he would have been astounded by the continuing attentiveness to his work, and the many and often perplexing functionalities of his ideas and theoretical positions (Elden 2018:293–298). However, would he ever have given consideration prolonging that attentiveness beyond his ability to react to it? No, he probably would not.

Foucault left no testament, but a few months before his death he did leave a note in which he explicitly spelt out his last wishes. His apartment in Paris, as well as the rest of his estate, was left to his partner, Daniel Defert. He wished not to be kept alive artificially – and he objected passionately to publications of any of his unedited or unfinished works after his death. That wish – or rather insistence – was honoured for close to four decades, both by Defert and Foucault’s brother and sister. Defert actually went so far as to remove Foucault’s most important documents from the apartment and had it placed in a bank vault for more than

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12. Apart from the Dutch reception (cf. Beukes 2020c), section titled ‘The event of *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair* (2018)’ of Chapter 1 is indebted to and largely based on Elden’s review (2018:293–311) of *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair*, used here with permission, in which he provided an in-depth exposition of the background to the editorial process and eventual publication of this text (cf. Elden 2016:101–102). This article is also available online at <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/review-foucaults-confessions-flesh/>



three decades. When *Dits et écrits*<sup>13</sup> was published a decade after his death, it included very specifically only the works that Foucault unequivocally granted permission for (amounting to four volumes making up more than 3000 pages in published format; Elden 2018:293–298).

In 2013, though, Defert sold all of Foucault’s manuscripts to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, which made the material available to bona fide researchers within a year after that. The collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale comprised more than 100 boxes of material, amounting to 37 000 pages of unpublished text, including notes, course material, lectures and incomplete manuscripts – including the relevant material for *Les aveux de la chair*. One should be cautious of accusations of a financial motive for the release of the material, firstly to the Bibliothèque Nationale and from there to the scholarship: simply because the quality of the content itself justifies Defert’s decision to eventually have it published under the editorial guidance of probably the most competent contemporary Foucault-scholar in France, Frédéric Gros, at the prestigious publisher, Éditions Gallimard, which was responsible for the publication of the three preceding volumes of the series, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, and *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, in Éditions Gallimard’s Bibliothèque des Histoires series. The question is: should now a ‘fourth volume’ be added in the

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13. Almost all of Foucault’s shorter writings and published interviews have been published by Gallimard (in French) in a collection called *Dits et écrits*, originally published in four volumes in 1994, later published as the Quarto edition in only two volumes. In English, there are a number of overlapping anthologies, which often use conflicting translations of overlapping pieces, frequently with different titles (Richard Lynch’s bibliography of Foucault’s shorter works has become invaluable for scholars in keeping track of these multiple versions in English and synchronising page numbers of texts in French and English). *Dits et écrits*, therefore, came out in two versions: the first four-volume set and a later two-volume set. The first version is no longer in print. Page numbers of these two editions do not match. The official multilingual website by Centre Michel Foucault (<https://centremichelfoucault.com/en/>) currently is in the process of producing a page concordance for converting the sets and a formula for connecting the page numbers of one edition with the other.

form of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 4: Confessions of the Flesh*? Can we read this book in unproblematic continuousness with the three ‘authentic’ volumes? There is some discomfort in the Foucault scholarship about a direct and simple answer to these questions.

It is true that Defert sold the material and did not offer it to the Bibliothèque Nationale free of charge. Yet he did not put it up for auction – if commercial interests were Defert’s objective, he might as well have gone for the highest bidder; yet he did not. Defert had considerable expenses storing the material and making the material coherently available so that the library could use, disseminate and release it effectively. It is of course just as true that Defert went back on a specific agreement, namely that he would honour his partner’s last wishes and take care of his estate, including the unfinished manuscripts, and not present these unfinished texts for publication. Defert held that agreement for more than three decades but had to have a very good reason for eventually breaking that agreement. If money was not the decisive factor, what was? It was the texts, which is breathtaking, to say the least, especially for scholars working with a Foucaultian positioning in Medieval Philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Foucault published Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* in December 1976, in which he made a number of highly innovative claims and discoursed conceptions of the ‘constituent subjects of sexuality’, namely ‘the perverse man’, ‘the hysterical woman’, ‘the masturbating child’ and ‘the married couple’. There are many suggestions that Foucault’s attention in 1976 was changing from the later Middle Ages to much earlier and antique material of the time. According to Elden (2018:298–300), Defert remembers that in August 1977 Foucault

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14. For examples of the author’s most recent ‘Foucaultian’ appraisals of Medieval themes and thinkers, see Beukes (2019, 2020a).

was reading patristic literature.<sup>15</sup> In January 1979, Defert again underscored Foucault's reading of the patristics from the 2nd century to the 5th century, including Cassian, Augustine and Tertullian. The most comprehensive treatise of this material available before the time was in *On the Government of the Living*, Foucault's Collège de France course from 1979 to 1980.<sup>16</sup>

The manuscript of *Les aveux de la chair* was very close to completion in June 1984 and Foucault was actually still working on it during his last stay in hospital. By now the working manuscript had been bestowed with the title *Les aveux de la chair*. In October 1982, Foucault offered the script to Éditions Gallimard but told them not to publish it straight away. He later recalled that the text's introduction offered remarks about pagan antiquity, but that it was a derivative and he wanted to survey the primary texts himself. His 1980 to 1981 Paris course *Subjectivity and Truth* explored these themes in detail. Foucault's initial plan was for one book on that earlier period, *L'usage des Plaisirs* [The Use of Pleasure]. The 'patristics' volume would then be the planned third volume. Yet in late 1983, he split the material of the immense manuscript on Greece and Rome in two and named the second part as *Le souci de soi* [The care of the self]. In early 1984, Foucault took back the manuscript of *Les aveux de la chair* from Éditions Gallimard and started the final editing of his manuscript. According to Elden (2018:301), 'French publishing timetables, at least for Foucault, were rapid, and he said to friends that the

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15. Some examples of this material could be seen in Foucault's Collège de France lecture courses, especially the 1977-1978 course *Security, Territory, Population*, with its analysis of the Christian pastorate. Some of this was used in his Tanner lectures *Omnes et Singulatim* in Stanford in October 1979. A lecture given in 1978 in Japan, 'Sexuality and power', is important as an insight into Foucault's thoughts of that time. Here, much more than in the concurrent Paris lectures, Foucault explicitly relates his themes to sexuality inquiry, linking his work on governmentality and the pastorate, to issues of morality and power (Elden 2018:300).

16. This course, essential as it is, rarely recounts the material overtly to the project on sexuality. Foucault also examined early Christianity in other lectures in October and November 1980, namely the lectures delivered in Dartmouth and Berkeley, which are published as *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, and in seminars in New York, of which only the 'Sexuality and solitude' lecture has been published thus far (Elden 2018:301).

‘fourth volume’ would appear in October’. The second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* were published in May and June 1984 respectively. Foucault received an author’s copy of *The Care of the Self* whilst he was hospitalised, just days before his death. He did not complete the final work on what now indeed had become the ‘fourth’ volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The script, with his modifications, the author’s copy of the text, and some other preliminary material were thus entrusted to Defert.

*Les aveux de la chair* is readily available on several commercial online platforms. The book has three main sections, comprising just over 240 pages. Foucault punctiliously traces the shift in attitudes from pagan antiquity to Christianity and investigates this transition in the first part, followed by a consideration of two critical subjects for early Medieval philosophers and the patristics, namely the ‘monk’ and the ‘married man’. Foucault’s array is pervasive, covering a comprehensive series of thinkers, from Justin in the 2nd century to Augustine and John Cassian in the 5th century, containing deliberations on church fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, John Chrysostom and Jerome. In the flysheet inserted in the early copies of the second and third volumes, *Les aveux de la chair* is described as a book that ‘will treat the experience of the flesh in the first centuries of Christianity, the role played by hermeneutics and the purifying decipherment of desire’. The now published *Les aveux de la chair* certainly lives up to that promise.

Gros edited the final four Collège de France courses by Foucault and thus knew the above period and its concerns well. Whilst Gros did the bulk of editorial work, Defert and Foucault’s cousin Henri-Paul Fruchaud are thanked for their ‘patient and helpful re-reading of the text’ (Elden 2018:308). Gros also consulted Michel Senellart and Philippe Chevalier, two highly rated Foucault scholars from France. He worked with both the typed copy and Foucault’s manuscript to set up the text. His model for the editing of this text comprised the second and third volumes, and stylistically these appear the same. Gros has

correctly, unlike the notes to the lecture courses, not filled in extra features beyond what was signified in Foucault's manuscript (Elden 2018:308).

Not having Foucault to discuss or debate *Les aveux de la chair* is, of course, a gigantic loss. Foucault, to a degree exceptional at the time and rarely equalled since, made interviews an integral part of his philosophical practice and these became a central part of his oeuvre.<sup>17</sup> Even if the metamorphoses in genre of book, article, lecture and interview are not appreciated as much as they should be in the ways Foucault is interpreted, the interviews always provide valuable insight into his thinking. As Elden (2018:310) correctly noted, those looking for an immediate connection between *Les aveux de la chair* and contemporary philosophical interests may be frustrated, but that is perhaps more to do with the absence of its author in the reception than with the text itself.

Every person involved in the event of the publication of *Les aveux de la chair* has long struggled with the core issue of

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17. For instance, the brilliant edition by Lotringer (ed. 1996), *Foucault Live, Collected Interviews, 1967-1984*. Some of these and many other published interviews were extensive and probed significant questions about Foucault's work. Lazreg's (2017:4) broader methodological consideration in this regard could be affirmed: Foucault's interviews indeed provide 'an opportunity to understand in concrete terms what his philosophical-theoretical approach often kept abstract'; they can 'hardly be dismissed as irrelevant to understanding his thought'. Foucault's views of events, such as in Iran, were undoubtedly never '*ad hominem*, but were informed by his philosophical orientation'. For example, his 'pronouncements on Japan were part of lectures as well as recorded interviews with significant scholars'. They 'cannot be ignored because they were not part of his written corpus'. Concerned about distortions in meaning, especially in the translation of interviews whose recordings are not available, as was the case in some instances in Japan, we are often cautioned in the scholarship against the use of interviews in re-articulating Foucault's ideas. This is a legitimate concern, in the sense that 'the interviews were generally oral', to some extent, 'unrehearsed and thus lacked the reflection and nuances that writing affords'. The 'multiple translations to which some of the published interviews were subjected to should also not diminish their documentary value, although (hermeneutic) allowance must be made for translations' distorting effects' in disseminating them; but this, of course, can be said of the translations of Foucault's books as well, after all. In general, the published interviews, such as the two particularly important ones on the Iranian revolution (Foucault 1979d, 1988a) help us to interpret Foucault's ideas and should be regarded as a constitutive part of his extant corpus (paraphrasing a solid argument in Lazreg 2017:4-5).

Foucault's stated wish against posthumous publications. If this wish were broken, then the texts would better make up for it, apart from being edited to the highest scholarly standards. Gros has unquestionably carried out the latter. *Les aveux de la chair* is indeed not a finished book by Foucault, but it was extremely close to a finished text. For those readers who appreciate the text as a continuation of the second and third volumes, there is much to consider here. One can only guess how this book might have been received if, as planned by Foucault, it had been published during or before October 1984, with its author present to take part in the conversation about its merits, possibilities and limitations.

This all brings us back to the first question: why is this publication causing tension amongst Foucault scholars? It possibly has to do with a sense of philosophical integrity: those against the publication of this work are against it because of their respect for Foucault as indeed a 'subject', a 'normal' human being, with indeed 'normalised' legal, if not moral, rights. Those in favour of the publication probably weigh Foucault's last wishes against the longevity of his philosophical legacy: they want to see Foucault live on, as much as he embraced death. Foucault scholarship is thus yet again at the crossroads, as it still is about his involvement in Iran from 1978 to 1979. And as is the case with 'Iran', no single answer is going to be the correct one. However, as in the case of 'Iran', eventually one has to make a choice.

One could suggest that two private (for Foucault, that is) considerations be weighed up against each other, namely the judicial and the philosophical. If the judicial (and indeed moral) factor weighs heavier, then it must be correct and valid that this *addendum* to *The History of Sexuality* should be regarded as inauthentic and at most profitable as an external reference to the Foucault corpus, in general, and to the three published volumes, in particular. Yet again, 'what is an author?' If the philosophical consideration weighs heavier, then Foucault's endless insistence on the 'death of the author' and the hermeneutic 'dissolvement of authorship' and thus 'author-ity', must be adhered to.

This means that with equal respect to the judicial position, the philosophical position would allow for an exegesis of *Les aveux de la chair* as an 'authentic' primary Foucault text, without being untrue to Foucault, both as a 'person' and yet always as a 'philosopher of the first kind'.

It would take years of specialised, niche-interested scholarship to disseminate the published text, and time, for once, would prove to be valuable in this regard. In the meantime, this book will, out of respect for both Foucault and Gros, refer to this text under Gros' competent editorship and however not as a text by Foucault himself. The scholarship is trusted not to have this issue hang in the balance but to supply authoritative advice on exegesis and references on its own time to the published text.

## ■ Foucault in Iran: Ten direct questions

Ten forthright questions that are used in the background as leitmotifs for the reading of Foucault's Iran writings, as well as the scholarship's reaction to those writings, are hereby presented. In the closing chapter, these questions will be readdressed in an attempt to answer them tentatively, yet as truthfully as possible:

1. Did Foucault explicitly support the cause of the revolting masses in Iran in 1978 on modern-critical grounds?
2. Did Foucault foresee Khomeini's understanding and implementation of what an 'Islamic Republic' would be, and did he, at any point of what was left of his career, endorse that understanding and application, even implicitly?
3. Was Foucault justifiably being held accountable by his critics in France for a naive perspective on the vicious potential embedded in any religious fundamentalism?
4. Did Foucault have clear objectives for his journalistic expedition to Iran, and if he did not, then why should that be a problem philosophically?
5. Did Foucault appreciate the unfolding of the revolution in Iran on strictly philosophical grounds?

6. Was Foucault primarily fascinated by the violent confrontation with identity he had witnessed in Iran?
7. Was Foucault intrigued by the possibility of a political alternative posed by the Iranian revolution?
8. Did Foucault compromise his philosophical position and reputation by not engaging the legitimate critique of subjects who were systematically crushed as the revolution unfolded?
9. Did Foucault underestimate the hostility with which his reports would be received?
10. Did Foucault's decision to go to Iran and report on the revolution, in the end, harm his reputation as being the leading intellectual in France and a world-renowned philosopher at the time?





# Political spirituality

**Keywords:** 9/11; James Bernauer; Jeremy Carrette; Islamofascism; Michiel Leezenberg; political spirituality; 11 September 2001; Shia Islam; Western liberal tradition.

## ■ Political spirituality

Until the tragic events of 11 September 2001, the rise of radical Islam had received little consideration from the Western liberal tradition. The left-wing appeared to have been uncertain about what to make of the extreme kind of anti-imperialism in radical Islamic circles (far more radical anti-imperialist than the Marxist left ever was) in the last decades of the 20th century, hesitant what to make of its rejection of Western culture, whilst the technological advantages of this culture were being retained by these circles (as Foucault's thoughts on the Iranian army in September 1978 and the 'cassette tape culture' signify; see sections 'The army – When the earth quakes' and 'What are the Iranians dreaming about?' of ch. 6). Above all, the left appeared to have been quite unsure about what to make of the unmatched kind of 'archaic fascism' (Rodinson 2005:268) in those ranks, its

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particular kind of fascism – *Islamofascism* – which was for a long time half a world away from leftist discourse. Then, on 9/11, it got very close.

Some anti-imperialists were promoting highly questionable culture-critical assertions in their interpretations of the events of 9/11. The author has argued sturdily against what could be considered to be the exaltation of pure and simple terrorism, found in the later works of Jean Baudrillard, as well as in the works of other anti-imperialists such as Paul Virilio and Slavoj Žižek, who, in their endeavour to pinpoint an anti-globalist hypothesis and an ‘aesthetic-sacrificial basis’ for the attacks, expressed what has been described as a ‘morbid, appalling and deeply unphilosophical admiration’ of the terrorists (Beukes 2005:1101-1114, 2019:1-3).

From the open-sphered considerations of modern-critical philosophy, there must be another way, vague as it may well be – yet a way pertinently different from, on the one hand, the interventionist policies of the US government in the post-9/11 years, with all the quasi-intellectual estimations provided by its champions of ‘neo-conservative liberalism’ and, on the other hand, the Baudrillardian kind of anti-imperialism which shatters the appeal of intellectual liability and philosophical ardour, the author finds characteristic of Western philosophy, from Aristotle to Boethius to Gadamer. Indeed, in a time when religion seems more than ever to be tangled with politics, Foucault’s perspectives on power, revolt, Otherness, political spirituality and an ‘ethics of Self-discomfort’ may provide us with some bursts of inspiration in our search for that elusive ‘other way’.

If anti-imperialism clearly amounted to nervousness and possibly an embarrassment for Foucault scholarship in just more than two decades from 1978 to 2001, it had after 9/11 become an established and distinctly painful theme in this arena: an open nerve, precisely because the incidents in New York, Washington and the US airspace on 11 September 2001 were horrible ‘in an unmediated sense’ (Beukes 2005:1103). It was a grotesque event: around 3000 civilians were killed in those two central domains of government at the

centre of the world's only remaining megalith, the United States of America (USA). The events of 9/11 designated a new phase reached by Islamic terrorism, which until 2001 had succeeded in attacking mainly outposts of the USA, except with a relatively low-impact bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993. The second Bush administration exploited this horrendous encounter, posed by a discreet and very much non-connected offshoot in fundamentalist Islam, Al Qaeda, to apply its own orthodox agenda, with what it called 'a global war on terrorism'. An unmatched martial and 'homeland security' stockpile was introduced, resulting in a significant amount of arrests of Muslims in the USA (and elsewhere), followed by a second, aggressively unilateralist war on the emphatically non-Islamic administration of Saddam Hussein in Iraq after swiftly demolishing the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the process, a broad *contra* Al Qaeda alliance was undermined and associates in western and northern Europe, Japan, Russia, China, India and especially its more unenthusiastic partners, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and several other Middle Eastern governments, were alienated. This second war on, and for several years afterwards in Iraq, incensed the Muslim world, revitalising the ranks of radical Islam – fundamentalist Islam, both Sunni and Shia, has thrived in Iraq since 2003.

In 1998, Amsterdam philosopher Michiel Leezenberg's groundbreaking article, 'Power and political spirituality: Michel Foucault on the Islamic revolution in Iran', was published.<sup>19</sup> It was the first article to thoroughly address the philosophical basis of Foucault's involvement in Iran, based on Leezenberg's exegesis of the notion of 'political spirituality' in Foucault's Iran writings. Yet, it was only after 9/11 that the importance of Leezenberg's (cf. 1998, republished 2004:99-115) article manifested itself (precisely the reason that the article was republished in 2004 in a prestigious editorial work by two eminent Foucault scholars, James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette).

Before Leezenberg's 1998 publication, the scholarship in the English language, only had relevant sections in three main

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19. Leezenberg (1998; listed in its republished format, 2004:99-115).

biographies of the 1990s, Eribon (1992), Macey (1993) and Miller (1993), and two temperate articles of Keating (1997) and Stauth (1991) at its disposal. However, monographs on Foucault or broader Foucault studies in English published after 2001 started to refer to, although still carefully, or in the minority of cases, dedicate a separate section on the issue of Foucault and Iran. Leezenberg's analysis of Foucault's involvement in Iran was, within years of its publication, thus determined as correct by the scholarship itself. It has been given systematic, yet relatively understated attention ever since.<sup>20</sup>

After 9/11, other Foucault scholars also began to investigate the promise in Foucault's turn towards a 'political spirituality' (henceforth without quotation marks) in the first years of the new century. Bernauer, a Jesuit priest who teaches philosophy at Boston College and has written several books on Foucault and theology, regarded Foucault's embrace of spirituality as a resource for thinking about how to integrate politics and religion (Yang 2005; cf. Bernauer 2004:77-97):

Religious discourse has an enormous power to move people to take action, to see beyond their immediate self-interest: and Foucault had an ability to see this, to see past the pervasive secularism of French intellectual life, that was quite remarkable. For better or worse, political spirituality is with us, and Foucault was one who helped us to focus our sights on it. (n.p.)

During the same time, Carrette (2000) contributed to the 21st-century understanding of political spirituality, namely as a Foucaultian analysis of the factors that lead or could lead to radically new sets of reconfigurations of subject-object relations.

A prerequisite for understanding Foucault's notion of political spirituality is his clarification of political freedom as *universal*. Although his interest in the ethics of 'care of the Self' and an 'aesthetics of existence' (Huijer 1999:63-83), as presented in

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20. Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:63-67) provides the most recent dissemination of the discursive importance of political spirituality in Foucault's Iran writings, again confirming the correctness of Leezenberg's initial analysis.

the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1984a, 1984b), could lead to the impression that freedom for him is compromised by a ‘valorisation of private creativity’ (Prozorov 2007:9), the Foucaultian notion of freedom consists in the confrontation with precisely the distinction between the public and the private, whereby one could supposedly liberate oneself from both prescriptions of an individual lifestyle and conventions of social practice (Fox 1998:421).

This ontology of freedom must logically lead to the abandoning of that valorisation of the public-private distinction altogether. What was at stake for Foucault was the confirmation of the irreducibility of the subject to any social order and thus an improbable confrontation between humanity and authority (McGushin 2005:629–641). Insofar as they are a confrontation with public authority, practices of freedom are necessarily public but at the same time fundamentally motivated by individual fears and private aspirations. For Foucault, the public and the private necessarily interpenetrate each other, as they are nothing but provisional means of organising human existence: they may well be the object of exercises of freedom, but never the establishment of freedom. In this sense, no collective project could be deduced from the Foucaultian ontological assertion of freedom, because Foucault both resists the lessening of existence to a normative project and he wants to convincingly take leave from any such project as the very constituent of freedom (Prozorov 2007:11). At the same time, Foucault’s (2006:1) position recollects Camus’ understanding of revolt as an individual affirmation of everyday existence: ‘I revolt, therefore we are’. For Camus, the ‘act of revolt actualises the universal solidarity between human beings by demonstrating, beyond the limits that it transgresses, the endless prospects of freedom’ that do not depend on any subject’s particular ‘identities, attributes or circumstances’ (Prozorov 2007:11).

In his interpretation of the more general significance of the Iranian revolution, Foucault echoed Camus in asserting that revolt, although always arising out of particular circumstances of oppression, confirms ‘nothing particular’ but rather a possibility

available to us all: '[i]t is through revolt that subjectivity introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life' (Foucault, in Bernauer 1990:180; Prozorov 2007):

As a potentiality, freedom is not only available to us *all* without any possibility for discrimination, but it is also available to us *all equally*: in asserting one's freedom one is always already *wholly free*, irrespectively of the positive degree of autonomy that one thereby achieves. In such a sense, a practice of freedom functions as an affirmation of human universality and is, therefore, unthinkable in terms of a narcissistic individualism. (p. 11)

Close to his understanding of political freedom as universal or at least 'cross-cultural' (Vintges 2011:107-108), Foucault's more general concept of 'spirituality' boils down to an ethical self-transformation, which is political in that it critically corresponds to the 'normal' Western subject construction of self-governing subjects, which themselves are products of the power-knowledge administration of Western modernity. This is the reason why Foucault (cf. 1991a:82) raised the concept of political spirituality in the context of his reflections on 'the will to discover a different way of governing oneself, through a different way of dividing up true and false – this is what I would call political spirituality'. In other words, for Foucault political spirituality comes down to a reconfiguration of existing subject-object relations.

Foucault was therefore articulating the necessity to separate subjectivity from Western modernity's sense of political rationality. He empathised with any resistance against this true-false management of subjectivity, a confrontation he also identified in the Iranian revolution, which, as far he was concerned, started as a revolt against the effort to modernise Islamic countries according to a European standard. In Iran, he wanted to address the 'possibility we have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity, namely a political spirituality' (Foucault 1978d:209). That is why the Shia tradition, as a particular presentation of Islam according to Foucault's sympathetic reading, differentiates between 'mere external obedience to the code' and 'the profound spiritual life' (Foucault 1988a:211).

When introducing his concept of political spirituality, Foucault thus had in mind the aspect of independent practices opposing truth administrations, which involve the entirety of peoples' lives. He pinpointed this dimension within religious contexts as well: in the second and third volumes (and obviously the 'fourth' volume as well) of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault addressed practices of uninhibited spiritual self-transformation, pertinently in religious contexts. That is why he referred not only to individual strands in Christianity and Islam but also in Asian religions.<sup>21</sup> Foucault nevertheless obscured this element, because he wanted to avoid his work being slurred as 'religious' or 'metaphysical', and because he did not want to offer any 'anthropological' standard or any absolute truth concerning the human condition. That is why the 'non-Western' counter-discourse in Foucault's earlier works could be found in his style, rather than in an overt opposition to Western 'normalised' life (Liebmann Schaub 1989:311-314).

In Foucault's later works, however, in which both Eastern and Western philosophies are approached from their practical or ethical side, we find that Foucault *does* offer an effective alternative to the normalised Western way(s) of life through his presentation of spirituality as 'ethical self-transformation through philosophical ascesis' (McGushin 2005:630-638, 2007:5-42). For example, during his visit to Japan in the first half of 1978, Foucault showed a remarkable and focused interest in precisely the practice of Zen Buddhism. After his initial training, he said to his teacher: 'I'd like to ask you just one question. It's about the universality of Zen. Is it possible to separate the practice of Zen from the totality of the religion and the practice of Buddhism?' (Foucault 1999:113). He also commented that whereas Zen and Christian mysticism, in terms of content, cannot be matched, the practice of Christian spirituality and that of Zen are similar. This question and comment show

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21. Liebman Schaub (1989:306-311) therefore speculates whether there is a counterpart to Foucault's trapped 'Western man', in the form of a subversive discourse in Foucault's work, which could be designated as an 'Oriental subtext'.



Foucault's interest in ethical-spiritual techniques as a universal or at least as a cross-cultural phenomenon.

Foucault did not only explore Zen in Japan in 1978 but also Islam in Iran in the second half of that year, in terms of a spirituality which can oppose truth regimes and possess the inherent (or 'immanent', as far as Foucault was concerned) potential to inspire new political forms. What one would find in Foucault's Iran writings is therefore not a simplistic 'right' or 'wrong' verdict on the revolution itself but a search for a new concept of freedom, which is 'universal' in that it could take into account a diversity of moral frameworks, including religious ones. Whilst it would be wrong to suppose that Foucault's interest in Iran arose only from a fascination with this spiritual transformation of subjectivity through political spirituality,<sup>22</sup> the Iran issue brought the question of political spirituality to the centre of his work. Although the concepts of *spirituality* and particularly *political spirituality* in Foucault's philosophical texts up to that point were not central, in his Iran writings, the constitution of a 'spiritual subject' and the study of related practices clearly and progressively became a significant concern (cf. Carrette 2000:136-141), as we would see in the following chapters.

The Iranian revolution, in its endeavour to overthrow the Shah, exposed to Foucault the 'full force of religious phenomena in holding the "collective will," "spirituality" forming the key factor in the people's challenge to institutional power' (Carrette 2000:137). For Foucault, the Shia religion in Iran (Carrette 2000; cf. Khatami 2003:121-125):

[B]rought to the Iranian people the 'promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity'. Foucault was particularly intrigued by the new revolutionary phenomenon found in religion and the way the 'spiritual' ('a highly prized additional level of meaning') mobilises a 'political will'. (p. 139)

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22. As Stauth (1991:259-280), in one of the first articles on the Iran issue from the English-speaking scholarship, has pointed out.

What emerged from Foucault's Iran writings, whether or not he correctly understood Shia Islam and the Iranian situation, was therefore an attempt 'to escape from the opposition between materiality and mystic phenomena' (Carrette 2000:139-140). As will be shown, there were – because he was a 'gazing Westerner' or 'self-conscious Greek' dwelling into the 'distant East' or 'Persia' – some inaccuracies about Shia Islam in Foucault's 'journalistic' writings from Iran, but the force of his interest in the power of religious subjectivity in the shaping of human life was at that point nonetheless well defined. As his descriptions of the Iranian revolutionary movement in *Corriere Della Sera* have illustrated (Foucault 1978a, 1978b, 1978c, 1978d, 1978e, 1978f, 1978g, 1978h, 1978i, 1979a, 1979b), religion for him was very much an *immanent* power (cf. Turner 2018:34-45). In order to show how Foucault explored this conviction in Iran, it is essential to trace and contextualise his movements in 1978 and the first quarter of 1979.



# Foucault's work and movements in 1978 and early 1979

**Keywords:** Black Friday Tehran, 08 September 1978; Collège de France; *Corriere Della Sera*; Daniel Defert; Foucault in Japan 1978; governmentality; (lectures on) Neoliberalism; Paul Veyne.

## ■ January 1978: A busy academic month and a visit to Germany

In early January 1978, Foucault started the course 'Security, Territory, Population' at the Collège de France. After introducing the issue of power, he swiftly moved on to the question of 'governmentality', which was as new for Foucault as it was for his

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students and interested companions.<sup>23</sup> He followed these lectures with a key address at a public seminar on the crisis of juridical thought at the beginning of the 19th century and partook in a separate seminar on 'The Genealogy of Societies of Security', which was led by François Ewald.

Foucault often expressed his desire to run a colloquium restricted to a small group of researchers, even though the rules at the time required that all instructions and peer-discussions at the Collège de France should be unrestricted and accessible to the public. During the two years of his working on governmentality and liberal political rationality, the small group of researchers from this eventualised colloquium regularly met in his office. This was where nominalist themes, as developed by Paul Veyne, were discussed. From January 1978 onwards, Foucault and Veyne began to have regular discussions around Foucault's new interest in Greek and Roman antiquity - which found its way to the still far away and posthumous 'fourth' volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

He then wrote the preface to the English translation of Georges Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological*, in which he identified both a concept of the ethics of the intellectual and a philosophy of that ethics. He also kept working on the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, in which he planned to focus on the Christian idea of 'the flesh'. It was to be a genealogy of concupiscence that addresses the practice of confession in Western Christianity and the direction of conscience as it developed after the Council of Trent. This manuscript was completely destroyed, and this theme was only readdressed in the aforementioned (see 'The event of *Histoire de la sexualité* '4':

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23. This chapter is largely based on Defert's (2013:11-83) synopsis as well as relevant remarks in Deacon (2003:9-20), Downing (2008:1-21), Elden (2016:1-7), Falzon and O'Leary (2010:1-16), Foucault (1999:110-114), Gane and Johnson (1993:1-9), Gutting (2005a:1-9, 2005b:1-28), Kelly (2009:1-6), Lemm and Vatter (2014:1-16), Macey (1993:7-26), May (2006:1-23), Miller (1993:13-36), Mills (2003:11-32), O'Farrell (2005:33-49), Oksala (2005:1-16), Rabinow (1997:xi-xlii), Simons (1995:6-12) and Sheridan (2005:1-9).

*Les aveux de la chair* (2018)' in ch. 1) 'fourth volume' of *The History of Sexuality* (ed. Gros 2018).

In this particularly tiring month, Foucault also started working towards establishing a quarterly that would republish the best economic and political analyses from the international press and started searching for financial support for this project.

In the last part of January 1978, Foucault travelled to Berlin with André Glucksmann and Catherine von Bülow for the so-called 'Tunix' meetings, at which the revolutionary Left explored new strategies in politics. Foucault surprisingly did not speak about anti-psychiatry within this context but rather about the political role of intellectuals. In Hanover, he took part in a demonstration in support of political scientist Peter Brückner, who had been prohibited from teaching or speaking at his university.

## ■ February and March 1978: Governmentality and the upcoming elections in France

In early February 1978, Foucault delivered a lecture that could be regarded as his first lecture on the history of the relation between governance and the governed. This lecture was eventually published in Italy in *Aut-Aut* journal, with a simple title, 'Governmentality'. Socialist weekly *Politique-Hebdo* questioned Foucault about his voting intentions in the upcoming legislative elections of 12–19 March 1978. Foucault answered that he did not have to broadcast his voting considerations publicly: for him that indicated a position of authority and not a position of critique.

He declared the same in 1981 on the occasion of presidential elections. This withdrawal from an open discussion on democratic elections laid foundation for the dispute, which later exploded between Foucault and socialists over the so-called 'silence of the intellectuals' (for which he was again charged with, coming back from Iran for the second time in November 1978).

## ■ April 1978: Foucault visits Japan

In April 1978, Foucault travelled to and spent the whole month in Japan, organised by the French cultural attaché Thierry de Beaucé. He gave a well-received lecture on 'Sexuality and Power' at the Faculty of Liberal Arts at the University of Tokyo.

During his visit to Japan and as mentioned in Chapter 2, Foucault engaged in several discussions with specialists in Kyoto on Zen Buddhist mysticism as compared with Christian mysticism. He had prepared well for this trip for several months, and had read Demiéville, Herrigel, Watts and Suzuki in advance. In Fukuoka, he visited a psychiatric hospital as well as a prison and met with magistrates and psychiatrists.

He then delivered a lecture at the University of Kyushu on power, analysed very precisely, concerning practices in psychiatric hospitals and prisons in Japan as compared with France. Foucault then travelled to Hirado, where the first Jesuits had arrived – obviously, he had an interest in that precarious first meeting between 'West' and 'East'.

Other outstanding commitments that Foucault met in Japan included his presence and active participation in a seminar with Moriaki Watanabe on the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* at the University of Tokyo. He then attended a roundtable discussion on Marxism with Ryumei Yoshimoto, with whom he maintained correspondence on Hegel and Marx. He had talks with Ichio Asukata, president of the Japanese Socialist Party, who had returned from China, on the experience of municipal management in Yokohama, Grenoble and Bologna.

He also met the celebrated Japanese political scientist Maruyama Masao. Interestingly, three days before he returned to France, in a televised interview about intellectual developments in France, Foucault summarised his visit to Japan by stating: 'what interests me here is history and the limits of Western rationality. This question is inevitable because Japan is not in opposition to Western rationality'. That was quite a remarkable

statement and the one that discursively echoed a few months later in Iran.

During the last week of his stay in Japan, Foucault resided in Seionji temple in Uenohara at the foot of Mount Fuji. There he practised Zazen postures under the guidance of a monk who had represented Japan in martial arts at the Munich Olympics. Foucault's natural connection with this monk left him baffled. He returned to Paris on 29 April 1978.

## ■ **May 1978: Turning down the first offer of *Corriere Della Sera***

Because the 'Foucault effect', to use the expression coined by the editor of above-mentioned *Aut-Aut* journal, was immense amongst Italian Left, in early May 1978, Italian publisher Rizzoli, a shareholder in *Corriere Della Sera*, offered Foucault an opportunity to publish a regular opinion column in the popular newspaper, which he turned down. As an alternative, he suggested forming a group of intellectuals to report on the history of ideas and its development in the 20th century.

Later in May 1978, the Society for the History of French Revolution, of which Maurice Agulhon was president, arranged a debate between Foucault and a group of historians, based on Jacques Léonard's review of *Discipline and Punish*, which had appeared in *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*. The papers presented at this event were published in *L'Impossible Prison* along with two Afterwords by historian Maurice Agulhon and Foucault himself.

In the last week of May 1978, Foucault presented his famous paper titled 'What Is Critique?' at the French Society for Philosophy. This was eventually published posthumously in 1990 in *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*. Yet, Foucault announced the very same day to Henri Gouhier, who chaired the symposium: 'I hesitated for a long time over the title of this paper, but the only one that actually fits is "What is Enlightenment?"'



That would, of course, become the title of the publication itself. Foucault's subsequent reading of Kant's minor works on history henceforth became a constant routine that remained with him till his last days. He also started his lectures on Neoliberalism, which he had been preparing for some time at Collège de France. These lectures played a significant role in his assessment of the developments in Iran later that year (Leezenberg 2018:11).

At the end of May 1978, Gallimard published *Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B* (by *Herculine Barbin*), a case of hermaphroditism, in the Gallimard series 'Parallel Lives'. Starting from the descriptions in a psychiatric chronicle from Île d'Oléron that Foucault had somehow 'found' (rather typical of his in-the-library forensic method), he explored the archives of this unique narrative about the medico-legal determination of 'true sex'. Foucault considered using some similar cases to produce one of the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. The young French novelist Hervé Guibert, whom Foucault had met the previous year, turned the chronicle into a script for a film in which European actress Isabelle Adjani agreed to play the title role.

## ■ June to August 1978: A horrible accident and preparations for Iran

During these three months, from June to August 1978, Foucault experienced some severe problems. Early in June 1978, the head of *Corriere Della Sera's* Paris bureau worked out a programme with Foucault regarding some substitute for the previously suggested column on the history of ideas that Foucault had turned down as a sole author the previous month. Foucault again stepped back but suggested presentations by each of the following authors: Susan Sontag on Vietnam, Alain Finkielkraut on the USA, Arpad Ajtony on Hungary and Jorge Semprun on Spain.

In August 1978, Rizzoli responded positively to Foucault's suggestion that more than one author would take part in this column whilst the notorious events in Abadan started attracting international attention to Iran. After some persuasion, Foucault

eventually agreed to inaugurate the particular series. He then set about doing his research on Iran, which was likely to be visited by him on the brink of a revolution. Shortly after that, he officially accepted *Corriere Della Sera's* invitation to report on the events in Iran as they unfolded.

In early July 1978, Foucault was run over by a car right in front of his apartment in Paris. He was badly injured and deeply traumatised by this horrible accident, all because of a reckless driver's foolishness. Foucault was consequently hospitalised for a few days at Vaugirard Hospital. As a result of trauma to his skull, without loss of consciousness, he suffered from migraines for at least the next year. In 1980, at Sartre's funeral, he told Claude Mauriac: 'since that accident, my life has changed. The impact of the car threw me onto the hood, and I had time to think – it's finished. I'm going to die. And I was fine with that'.

## ■ September and October 1978: The first trip to Iran and back to Paris

Foucault arrived in Tehran on 16 September 1978. He had rushed there following the 08 September 1978 Black Friday massacre at Jaleh Square, in which the Shah's troops shot at protesters, brutally killing more than a hundred and wounding literally thousands of people. Foucault's trip was arranged through Thierry Voeltzel and Iranian exiles, all close to Karim Sanjabi. With Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet, journalists from *Libération*, Foucault went to the most troubled spots of the conflict. On 20 September 1978, in Qom, the religious capital of Iran, he met Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, one of the most important liberal religious leaders in Iran at that time and a follower of the Shia tradition. His appraisal of the immediate situation in the country strongly influenced Foucault's view of the events as they were unfolding.

Mehdi Bazargan, president of the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, acted as their interpreter. Foucault also met representatives of most of the political groupings of Iran at that time. At that time Ayatollah Khomeini, who was in exile in Iraq,

was still unknown in the West. Foucault returned to Paris on 24 September 1978 and wrote his first articles for *Corriere Della Sera*, convinced, contrary to public opinion, that the Shah's army, which was collapsing in the face of Islamist uprising, could no longer exercise political control. In Paris, Foucault met Bani Sadr, just before the arrival of Khomeini in France in October 1978.

*Le Nouvel Observateur* published a translation of one of Foucault's articles from *Corriere* on 16 October 1978, in which he for the first time used the phrase 'political spirituality' – a concept, as we have seen in Chapter 2, closely connected to his reflections about political and ethical subjectivation. The translated article immediately provoked anger in the French left, except amongst young leftists in Paris. A heated and extensive exchange of letters followed, both public and private.

## ■ November and December 1978: The second trip to Iran

Bernard Kouchner, Jacques and Claudie Broyelle, as well as Alain Geismar, appealed for a 'Boat for Vietnam' initiative to help the so-called 'boat people' in the stricken country. They were supported by Sartre, Aron, Montand, Signoret, Foucault, Rocard, Clavel, Barthes and Ionesco. However, support for the boat people introduced a new rift within the intellectual left of France.

Whilst undertaking a systematic re-reading of Thomas Mann, Foucault returned to Iran on 09 November 1978. He attempted to engage the same Iranians, as effected during his first trip, to follow the possible development of their views. He remarked that he was concerned to know how, outside Marxism, it was possible in the late 20th century to establish principles that were crucial for a communal existence.

Foucault then undertook a trip to Abadan, where oil refineries were on work stoppage. Representatives of People's Fedayeen explained to him their reasons for supporting Khomeini. On 15 November 1978, Foucault returned to Paris, where he wrote his final articles on Iranian revolution.

On 19 November 1978, the Italian weekly *L'Espresso* published – without permission – a fragment of the above-mentioned text written for *Aut-Aut*, as if it was part of a debate between Foucault and the Italian communist philosopher Massimo Cacciari and ‘other supporters of the Gulag’. This led to an angry skirmish with Italian communists, which Foucault ended with a letter to *L'Unità*. Duccio Trombadori, a journalist with *L'Unità*, suggested a debate with Italian Marxist intellectuals and sent Foucault about a dozen pages of questions. He agreed to answer some of them and through a series of subsequent interviews, this initiative, according to his partner Defert (2013:70), became some bizarre ‘intellectual biography’ of Foucault. In December 1978, *The American Philosophical Association* organised a session on Foucault’s work in Washington. Notable participants included Hayden White, Reiner Schurmann, Hugh Silverman and Peter Caws.

## ■ January and February 1979: The birth of ‘bio-politics’ and Khomeini’s return to Iran

On 07 January 1979, Foucault wrote this peculiar note in the presence of Defert (2013:n.p.): ‘not to pass universals through the shredder of history, but to pass history through a form of thought that refuses universals. What history, then?’ The history of Christian confession led him to study the early texts of the Church fathers – Cassian, Augustine and Tertullian, in particular. A new subject matter slowly emerged now for the then-intended second volume of *The History of Sexuality: Confessions of the Flesh*. The study of early Christian texts turned his genealogical research towards the Greek and Latin texts of late antiquity. Obviously, this study never found its way to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*. It took almost 40 years to concretise it in (for now) an editorial work,<sup>24</sup> that is, *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair* (ed. Gros 2018).

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24. See the exposition in section ‘The event of *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair* (2018)’ of Chapter 1.

On 10 January 1979, Foucault started lecturing his course entitled 'The Birth of Bio-politics', which, in fact, focused on liberal governmentality. His famous Monday seminar, which was announced with the title 'Method in the History of Ideas', focused on the procedures of risk management in modern societies. In these lectures, Foucault stated: '[t]he state does not have an essence. The state is not a universal nor in itself an autonomous source of power. The state is nothing else but [...] a perpetual stratification'. On 01 February 1979, Khomeini, who had been in exile in Neauphle-le-Château, France since October 1978, triumphantly returned to Iran. Bani Sadr suggested Foucault to accompany him to Iran, an invitation firmly declined by Foucault.

## ■ March and April 1979: Foucault under constant attack

On 06 March 1979, Foucault was confronted in the newspaper *Le Matin*, in the context of International Women's day, for his supporting the Iranian revolution. As Sartre had found it difficult to find another discreet location, because of fear of attacks, Foucault, on 14 and 15 March 1979, hosted in his apartment the 'Israeli-Palestinian colloquium', organised by *Les Temps Modernes*. On 17 February 1979, revolutionary groups began to execute opponents of the new Iranian regime – per definition those who were considered, even by slander, to be loyal to the earlier regime of the Shah. On 23 and 24 March 1979, Foucault showed up in Paris for 2-day discussions on 'Nuclear Energy and Energy's New Order'. Foucault nevertheless did not take part in the talks and refused to visit a nuclear plant.

On 24 March 1979, Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet published *Iran: La Révolution au nom de Dieu* (Éditions du Seuil): the book ended with Foucault's interview as an afterword (see 'The spirit of a world without spirit' in ch. 10), in which he yet again and steadfastly emphasised the extent to which 'the collective will of the Iranian people impressed him, and that will wasn't articulated according to Western schemas of revolution'. The book provoked

several responses, which focused their hostility on Foucault; even though most of the arguments did not come from the afterword but from the book itself. Foucault was left extremely upset by these responses. On 26 March 1979, he, nevertheless, presented a preface for the French translation of Peter Brückner's *Ennemis de l'État*.

On 01 April 1979, in the first issue of France's first 'homosexual newspaper', *Le Gai Pied*, Foucault published an article in favour of suicide, for which he was vehemently criticised in *Le Monde* and other newspapers. On 14 April 1979, he published an open letter to Mehdi Bazargan in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in which he clearly condemned the actions of the Iranian regime and attempted to influence Bazargan, the prime minister of Iran.

Thus, the period of 16 months from January 1978 to April 1979 presented its own highlights and problems: apart from continuing his academic work at Collège de France, Foucault visited Germany and Japan for a month, saw the left severely beaten in the March 1978 elections, was involved in a traumatic accident, visited Iran twice, in September and November 1978, witnessed Khomeini's return to Iran on 01 February 1979 and came under constant attacks thereafter, in particular. The question is: how did the philosopher handle those vicious blows?



# ***Corriere Della Sera:* A strange invitation**

**Keywords:** Ahmad Salamatian; Ayatollah Shari'at Madari; *Corriere Della Sera*; *Le Nouvel Observateur*; Mehdi Bazargan; Foucault's Iran writings; Thierry Voeltzel.

## ■ ***Corriere Della Sera:* A strange invitation**

As discussed in Chapter 3, Foucault in the first half of 1978 was invited to write a regular opinion column as a special correspondent for the Italian daily *Corriere Della Sera*. Foucault turned down the offer made by the main publisher Rizzoli in early May 1978. However, after negotiations, Foucault finally accepted the offer but insisted on contributing to the column only in cooperation with other columnists. That is how he eventually accepted the publisher and newspaper's invitation to visit Iran and report on-site, as it was, on the unfolding of the revolution. As mentioned in the Introduction, although it is not uncommon for European

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newspapers to petition reports from prominent academics, Foucault never indicated clear objectives for the philosophical nature of such an undertaking (Eribon 1992:281; Miller 1993:308).

Foucault never made clear as to what extent 'the intellectual' could become 'a journalist'. This precisely is the problem for the majority of Foucault scholars, in the sense that even today we have no clear indication of Foucault's primary objectives. If it is true that lack of knowledge about his own identity was the primary cause of his presumed 'mistake', then it is exactly at this crossroad (Foucault, the journalist in the Orient or Foucault, the Western philosopher) that the difficulties for many of the interpretations of Foucault's involvement in Iran begin. Why was Foucault so unclear about the philosophical quality of his immersion in the Iranian revolution? At first impression, Foucault's following answer (cited in Miller 1993) does not suffice:

I go to see what is happening, rather than referring to what is taking place abroad without being informed in a way that is precise and meticulous. (p. 308, fn. 82)

Indeed, it is a curious remark, yet it is typical of the stylistic distinctiveness, the elusiveness, the tentative nature of Foucault's Iran writings. In other words, Foucault's vagueness about what he was going to do and what he was possibly going to find in Iran is thematically relevant in this context. From the style and content of his Iran writings itself, it is clear that Foucault was, philosophically, displaced in Iran and that he lacked the comfort of what he would otherwise have recognised as 'discourse'. It is clear from their presentation and content that these writings are stylistically unique – they certainly are not philosophical essays, even by Foucault's open-ended understanding of 'discourse' – yet by their well-defined and convincing modern-critical claims, they are philosophical contributions to his oeuvre, in particular, and his critique of the project of modernity, in general, specifically because of their timid and self-interrupting nature. Foucault was hesitant in Iran – and those who have even a rudimentary knowledge of his essential writings would agree that Foucault 'in

the West' never strikes one as being unsure or hesitant – rather the opposite: he was always an extremely assertive and challenging intellectual.

However uncertain about and uncomfortable with the unfamiliar philosophical order of things they may lead to, Foucault thus took the risk and accepted the offer to present his writings to the newspaper. He negotiated strict terms with the editor of *Corriere Della Sera* for their publication, making sure that his contributions (eventually covering a total of 15 articles and interviews<sup>25</sup>) would not be conventional philosophical inquiries but 'on-the-scene investigations' (Eribon 1992:281, 289), or a 'journalism of ideas' (Leezenberg [1998] 2004:99) or one of his 'present histories' (Beukes 2004:884). The articles would appear on page one of *Corriere Della Sera*, titled 'Michel Foucault Investigates', yet these and other parts of his writings on Iran would be republished and freshly reworked in French newspapers and journals, such as the daily *Le Monde* and the widely circulated leftist weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* (cf. Foucault 1978a, 1978b, 1978c, 1978d, 1978e, 1978f, 1978g, 1979a, 1979b). Iranian student activists translated at least one of his essays into Persian and posted it on the walls of Tehran University in the last quarter of 1978 (Afary & Anderson 2005:3). The said Persian translation and publication of his Iran writings, titled *Iraniha CheRoya'ISar Darand* (Foucault 1998) would follow two decades later, still years before they would be available in English.

Imprecise as he was about the philosophical significance of his venture, Foucault was logistically relatively well prepared for his journalistic expedition: working with his project coordinator Thierry Voeltzel and seeking out the company of other foreign journalists, he interviewed a variety of informants, talking with representatives of the Shah's army, American advisers, opposition leaders, such as Mehdi Bazargan and Abol Hassan Bani Sadr, as

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25. Republished in French in Foucault (1994), translated and published in Persian (Foucault 1998) and for the first time fully translated into English and republished by Afary and Anderson (2005:181-277).

well as Ayatollah Shari'at Madari, widely regarded at that time the most influential yet moderate of Iran's mainstream religious leaders (Foucault 1978a:190; cf. Miller 1993:308), who, for example, opposed participation of the '*ulamâ*', the higher Shia clergy, in government administration. Foucault also spoke to striking workers in Abadan, the principality of the oil region, inner-city bourgeois individuals, including striking airline staff in Tehran, members of the military identifying with the movement, university staff, and wherever time allowed for it, he interviewed Iranians in the streets.

Foucault received explanations and answers from the revolting people in these streets, as well as the addresses for connecting with discreet informants such as Ahmad Salamatian, a Parisian-based secularised Iranian intellectual, in exile since 1965, who was to become deputy minister of Foreign Affairs in the short-lived post-revolutionary government. Foucault had studied Paul Vieille's and Louis Massignon's magisterial sociological studies on Iran and Henry Corbin's authoritative four-volume work on Iranian Islamic philosophy and spirituality (Leezenberg [1998] 2004:101). From Iran, he called and had long discussions with philosopher friends such as André Glucksmann and Alain Finkielkraut (Eribon 1992:282).

Adequate to state that Foucault went to Iran armed with a general knowledge of Iran, knowledge about the Shia tradition as mainly interpreted by Corbin as well as perspectives presented by middle- to upper-class Iranian expats. There do not appear to be key Muslim theologians, either Shia or Sunni, other than Shari'at Madari, amongst the people he interviewed in either Paris or Iran who might have added value to his understanding of the relationship between religion and politics as understood by Iranians themselves.

Foucault thus went to Tehran in mid-September 1978 on the first of the two trips (the second one in the second half of November 1978, when the reaction against the Shah was reaching its brutal climax), in the company of Voeltzel, to spend 10 days

with demonstrators in the streets of Iran. Those were the days after 'Black Friday', 08 September 1978, when the Shah's army had shot on a crowd at Djaleh Square in Tehran, leaving as many as hundred Iranians dead and thousands wounded (although the number of actual casualties on that day has always been disputed). After Black Friday, the popular uniting call was for the Shah's departure, rather than reconciliation or reforms (Leezenberg [1998] 2004:100; Miller 1993:308).

Foucault (1988a) had entered into this incinerator – a strange one, where no one seemed to be afraid of burning to death:

When I arrived in Iran, immediately after the September massacres, I said to myself that I was going to find a terrorised city, because there had been 4000 dead.<sup>26</sup> Now I can't say that I found happy people, but there was an absence of fear and intensity of courage, or rather, the intensity that people were capable of when danger, though still not removed, had already been transcended. (p. 220)

Although *Corriere Della Sera* datelined the articles 'Tehran', Foucault wrote them in France, after returning from Iran (the first visit was from 16 to 24 September 1978, and the second one was from 09 to 15 November 1978). As *Corriere Della Sera* translated those articles into Italian, they were not at once available in French. As highlighted, Foucault did publish extracts and summaries of those articles in French publications as well, notably the widely circulated *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Monde*.<sup>27</sup>

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26. Foucault seems to have adhered to this exaggerated death count at Djaleh Square, propagated by the revolting masses themselves. Thousands were wounded, but the death toll unlikely accounted to more than hundred casualties. As formal statistics and official reports were never released, the true extent of deaths has remained uncertain.

27. See Afary and Anderson (2005:181). The full register of 15 writings (Foucault 1978a, 1978b, 1978c, 1978d, 1978e, 1978f, 1978g, 1978h, 1979a, 1979b) is not discussed, but only seven main articles, cross-referencing them to the other eight articles. Those seven articles are the most representative of the content and tone of Foucault's Iran writings, and the most consequential in terms of his broader philosophical project, namely his critique of modernity, which is the basis of the reception of Foucault's work in this book in more general terms.



# Into the Incinerator, 16 September 1978

**Keywords:** Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; Iranian revolution 1978–1979; *komitehs*; Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979); Shia Islam; Shahpour Bakhtiar; *ulamâ*.

## ■ Into the Incinerator, 16 September 1978

Every 40 days, the masses reappeared to mourn, as Shia Muslims do, the thousands that had died, and the police and army would again assault the mourners, producing more martyrs – a country with one of the most lethal armies in the world was in the third quarter of 1978 sinking into chaos, faced with a population seemingly keen to die.<sup>28</sup>

The protesters typically wore white shrouds, as a sign of their readiness to face death. The world was watching one of the

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28. Miller (1993:306–307), in an unforgettable overview of the aftermath of Black Friday.

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greatest populist explosions in human history (Miller 1993:306–307; 451, fn. 79) which was becoming an embodiment of Marx’s notorious yet justifiable comment that ‘religion is the heart of a heartless world’. From September 1978 to April 1979, in the course of this epic revolution with its millions of participants, the Iranian people overthrew the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979), who had pursued a dictatorial programme of economic and cultural modernisation for more than 25 years (Cottam 1990:3). The Shah’s regime had never gained a broader base in Iranian society but had acquired a measure of legitimacy in the two decades following a coup, backed by the CIA, which had brought him to power in 1953.<sup>29</sup> By the mid-1970s, protests against the repressive nature of the regime and widespread corruption in Iran started to increase dramatically.

The Shah reacted by intensifying political repression on the one hand, and introducing lacklustre reforms on the other, which only proved to nourish the potential for organised resistance. Initially, the demonstrations calling for substantial reforms were led by secularised left-wing, urban-based intellectuals, but from 08 January 1978 onwards the Shia Iranian clergy was fully mobilised into internal warfare after a demonstration by Shia seminary students in Qom led to a confrontation with security forces, leaving 20 students dead. After this event, resistance against the Shah was centred on religious institutions and organised by urban as well as non-urban mullahs, intensely influenced by the high-ranking Shia scholars (the *ulamâ*).<sup>30</sup>

By late 1978, the Islamist faction led by these Shia mullahs, loyal to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was still in exile in the Shia holy city of Najaf in Iraq, had come to dominate the anti-Shah uprising, including secular nationalists, democrats and liberal Iranian intellectuals (Cottam 1990:5; Miller 1993:309).

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29. Bakhsh (1986:48–63); Gasiorowski (1987:263); Kinzer (2008:1–29); Leezenberg ([1998] 2004:99).

30. Bakhsh (1986:48–63); Leezenberg ([1998] 2004:100); Rodinson (1978:233).

The Shia Islamists fully controlled the organisation of the protests, which for example meant that many secular women protesters who joined the protests were pressured into donning the veil, as an expression of solidarity with Shia Iranian Muslims (Afary & Anderson 2005:1-2, cf. 72-74). By 16 January 1979, the Shah had left the country. Khomeini returned from exile on 01 February 1979 - the last few months of his 15-year exile, from October 1978, were spent in Paris - to take power. A provisional government led by Shahpour Bakhtiar tried to introduce quick reforms, but it was perceived to be too closely associated with the Shah for it to have any public support, hence was ousted in a three-day uprising from 10 to 12 February 1979 (Afary & Anderson 2005:106; Leezenberg [1998] 2004:100). A fierce competition for supremacy was now developing amongst the groups that led the revolution. In the anarchy that followed the Bakhtiar provisional government, a powerful but uncontrolled, volatile and explosive new force was formed all over Iran: The so-called revolutionary committees or *komitehs*, which were responsible for much of the carnage that was to follow (Bakhash 1986:48-63).

After Khomeini's return to Iran, he at once began to assume absolute power, even to a large extent over the *komitehs*, providing them with 'revolutionary courts', a new and draconian code of justice, which essentially implied a free hand to impose capital punishment and carry out swift public executions. Thousands of Iranians associated with the old regime - even by slander and rumour - were rounded up and tortured, or summarily executed, or both. 'Homosexuals' were dispatched to firing squads. Any 'adulterer', which simply meant anyone talking with an unrelated person of the opposite sex - or often anyone merely accused of 'adultery' - could be stoned to death on a whim. Iran in the first months of 1979 became a ruthless theocracy, inspired by Khomeini's understanding of an 'Islamic government' (cf. Afary & Anderson 2005:109). On 30 and 31 March 1979, a national referendum was held, and the outcome was confirmed on 01 April 1979, declaring Iran an 'Islamic republic' by an overwhelming majority.



From September 1978 to April 1979, everything changed in Iran. It was a revolution in the most inflexible sense of the word. But the religious fervour providing the revolution with all its force was not going to depart once victory was obtained – ‘the mullahs were not going to return sensibly to their mosques’ (Leezenberg [1998] 2004:100). They had drawn blood, had a glimpse of what absolute power could do, and had become the judges and executioners of this bloody new dispensation. The bloodshed of the last quarter of 1978 suddenly seemed ignorable, given the utter carnage that followed Khomeini and the *komitehs*’ vicious execution of power in the first and second quarters of 1979. Around 10 to 12 thousand Iranians had died in the uprising of late 1978 – but thousands more during the bloody aftermath in the first quarter of 1979 alone (cf. Miller 1993:313).<sup>31</sup>

Initially, progressive and leftist intellectuals around the world were much divided in their evaluations to the Iranian revolution. The repression that turned demonstrations and processions into bloodbaths in 1978 had aroused disgust against the Shah’s regime and sympathy for the Iranian people. Everyone, it seems, eventually hoped that the Shah would leave Iran; but no one bothered about what would happen afterwards. Whilst some Western liberals supported the overthrow of the Shah on the grounds of violation of human rights, they were far less enthusiastic about the notion of an Islamic republic. And most, if not all Western liberals, considered

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31. Beukes (2009a:4, fn. 8) – In-depth reading on the broader socio-political and socio-historical contexts of Iranian revolution, and ultimately the bloodshed in the first quarter of 1979, should consider the following sections in or otherwise complete works of Abrahamian (1982:496–530,1993:60–87); Afshari (2001:14–32); Arjomand (1989:91–176); Bakhash (1986 – an outstanding introduction); Cottam (1990:3–15); Dabashi (2005 – a post-9/11 updated version of a celebrated introduction, first published in 1993); Esposito (2003:26–70), Halm (1997 – a sober introduction to Sunni-Shia oppositions by a philosophically erudite historian from Tubingen); Hiro (2000:103–135); Kinzer (2008:ix–xxv, 119–133); Kurzman (2004 – a balanced overview of the revolution from organisational, religious, cultural and military perspectives); Martin (2003:100–165); Milani (1994:59–104); Momen (1987:246–299); Mortimer (1982:296–376); Mottahedeh (2000 – the complete book is crucial for orientation; this is the revised and updated version; in terms of depth, scope and eloquence, this book has no rival); Parsa (1989:91–222) and Vahdat (2002 – an introduction to the intellectual basis of the modernisation of Iran).

any possibility of restoring Islamic tradition for guiding the government and the life-world system in Iran as regressive, if not barbaric (cf. Miller 1993:309–310). Yet, Foucault resisted the *de rigueur* quality of these reserves. Rather interested in the contra-modern nature of the uprising itself, he was intrigued by the quality of the mass spirituality the world was confronted with in the last quarter of 1978. The resistance to modernity and modernisation must have been, for him, just too obvious.

In his expedition to Iran, Foucault (cited in Oliver 2010) was, from the outset, disapproving the Shah's regime:

He saw it as autocratic, particularly in terms of its use of secret police as a means to establish a climate of fear among the population. He was excited about the opposition of Ayatollah Khomeini, viewing it as potentially ushering a new form of religious democracy. (p. 113)

Foucault seems at first glance to 'have overlooked or not accepted alternative analyses that saw the potential both for totalitarianism and the oppression of women within the proposed religious state' (Oliver 2010:113). But that was only on the surface: what Foucault recognised, was a potential for the manifestation of a political spirituality, an alternative to both liberalist discourse in the 'West' and Islamism in the 'East'.

Foucault indeed accepted several arguments put forward by Khomeini devotees 'that men and women would be treated differently but equally in a new religious state'. He (in Oliver 2010) also accepted the principle that it was:

[P]ossible to treat men and women by different standards, and yet to retain a principle of equality between the sexes. It may be that, when he heard people predicting an oppressive regime that would drastically reduce the liberty of women in particular, he felt that people were being needlessly critical of Islamic society. (p. 114)

Foucault's (cited in Oliver 2010) only 'prediction' at the time was that, in a country now to be governed by the ayatollahs:

[T]here would not be any form of hierarchy, and thus the country would naturally tend towards democracy. In this, he seems to have

underestimated not only the influence of the ayatollahs, but their hunger to use this influence to control the religious nature of the new society. (p. 114)

Foucault seems to have thought that the imams would not use their influence to regulate the behaviour of citizens in the new Iran. It appears that he believed that the society would return to a form of a non-threatening ideal, characteristic of society during the inception of Islam. There were serious concerns amongst several observers, both within and outside Iran, during late 1978 and early 1979, that 'the lives of minority groups such as the Baha'is would be in danger from an Islamic society. Foucault did not think this was at all likely; but unfortunately, events would prove him wrong' (Oliver 2010:114).

Female protagonists, outside Iran as well, objected the projected new system, anticipating some form of 'Islamic government'. They were troubled by the possibility of a fundamentalist ideology, and also that a new religious administration would in effect preserve the 'worst extremes of the earlier regime, albeit reinforced by different validations. Those who spoke out were also frightful of the methods of Islamic judicial punishment that they saw in other Islamic countries' (Oliver 2010:114).

Foucault had suggested in his writings on the Iranian revolution that combining religion and politics could actually construct an efficient kind of administration. This idea was severely criticised by several political writers in France. Moreover, it soon became apparent that other subgroups in Iran were in a state of grave vulnerability, and reports regarding the executions of 'homosexuals' started surfacing in Paris (cf. Oliver 2010:114). For Foucault, such reports cut very close to the bone. Yet, he did not back down on his pro-revolution stance as published in his reports.

It is rather inexplicable: did Foucault not unswervingly argue against the idea of universalist perspectives on history, society and the link between the two? Indeed, in a personal sense,

Foucault wanted to maintain his personal freedom to interpret society as he wished, but also to retain that freedom of thought for others. He did not wish to be constrained into a single paradigm or theoretical perspective and did not prescribe it upon anyone else. However, in his Iran writings, he clearly did not anticipate that there was any danger of tyranny within the spiritual guidance of the new leaders, notwithstanding many concerned opinions in Europe and France, in particular. The evidence was overwhelming, especially regarding the treatment of women and 'homosexuals', yet Foucault did not withdraw any of his assertions about the validity of the Iran uprising. This rightly caused disbelief amongst those who supported Foucault as a philosopher up to that point.

Foucault nevertheless was at the time seriously involved in human rights problems. One of Foucault's most important contributions during this period was to accrue backing for the aforementioned 'boat people', who had left Vietnam in the mid-1970s onwards. The fall of Saigon in April 1975 to the North Vietnamese army witnessed the start of a series of efforts by many people to leave former South Vietnam to seek sanctuary in adjacent countries or to be granted asylum in countries such as the USA and Australia. People wanted to leave former South Vietnam because either they had been working for the US administration and hence would be subjected to retaliation or were likely to be imprisoned because they were perceived to be ideologically opposed to North Vietnam. The years following the victory of the North Vietnamese and the reconsolidation of the country were harsh and ambiguous until the country as a whole was stabilised after many years of war and conflict. The majority of these people struggled to leave Vietnam, forcing many of them to buy a place in a boat that could reach other countries or to be picked up by neutral ships in international waters. Hence, such people were called 'boat people', who endeavoured this hazardous way of fleeing from Vietnam and suffered extensively. Many boats were ill-equipped and overturned, whilst others were seized by bandits, often killing the escapees. Only a small number

in the end found asylum in Western countries. The misery and difficulties of such people had attracted considerable media attention in France because Vietnam being its former colony. Foucault, in his defence, made constant and resolute efforts to highlight the dilemma of Vietnamese refugees (cf. Oliver 2010:116).

The obvious question in everyone's mind was: why was Foucault not as clear and 'helpful' in his observations of the developments in Iran as he was with Vietnam? The answers are to be found in his Iran writings, which radiated uncertainty and self-discomfort, yet were unfaltering in Foucault's convictions about the appeal of political spirituality.

# Foucault's most consequential Iran writings

**Keywords:** Ahmed Salamatian; 'Atoussa H'; Ayatollah Khomeini; Black Friday, 08 September 1978; *Corriere Della Sera*; Foucault as journalist; Foucault's Iran writings; Foucault and religion; Shia Islam's non-hierarchical nature.

## ■ Foucault's most consequential Iran writings

Before we proceed to the seven most consequential of Foucault's Iran writings, this apparent intra-philosophical difficulty must have bothered critical readers from the outset: how did a philosopher who specialised his whole academic life in themes of particularity manage to become a journalist, generalising experience, as journalists typically have to do? (cf. Beukes 2009a:6).

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Foucault, engaging in this project, was not completely new to journalism: in France, he had been intimately involved in launching *Libération*, and he had been a regular contributor to *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Eribon 1992:281). Yet, he was completely new to being a journalist in the proper sense of the word, speaking on behalf of others, or 'saying what others are saying about others, as journalists typically have to do' (Beukes 2009a:6). A close associate of Foucault, Jonathan Rée, has pointed out that unlike some other contemporary figures of French intellectual life, Foucault was always 'reluctant to air his opinions about big political issues'. It was not that Foucault was uninterested in politics or indifferent to human suffering, certainly not, but rather that he was suspicious of the species of intellectuals – 'universal intellectuals' as he often referred to them – who considered it their privilege and duty to set the world right, 'as if history had appointed them to speak on its behalf, or morality had summoned them to be the conscience of the human race' (Rée 2005:46).

However, even more relevant to our treatise, Foucault was a philosopher of particularity – and journalists need to generalise their stories for it to have effect and street credibility. Journalists tell the human story of the event – whilst 'Foucault typically tells us stories of marginalised subjects outside events' (Beukes 2009a:6). Indeed, anyone who has read Foucault's famous analyses of typical modern institutions – *Discipline and Punish*, or the preceding *Madness and Civilization*, published in the very early 1960s, or the thematic parallel *Birth of the Clinic*, to the three volumes<sup>32</sup> of *The History of Sexuality*, for example – would understand why Foucault must have found it challenging to be a journalist, to speak in the name of others. He had immense respect for the other's otherness.

Foucault was at heart a historian, however unconventional, who spent the best part of his life studying ancient documents in the

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32. Again, it is too early in terms of the reception and dissemination of *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair* (ed. Gros 2018), to speak of a four-volume work, or a series now consisting of four volumes.

Bibliothèque Nationale and the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir in Paris. However, he was also a social philosopher with a specialised interest in those small-scale processes in the webs of social interests, or ‘particularities’, or ‘micro-power’, as he called it, that travel through the labyrinths and dark corners of the institutions in and by which we live. Foucault was always on the lookout for themes that refused to conform to the ‘normal’ ways of established notions and conventions – he was interested in particularities, idiosyncrasies, uniquenesses and discrepancies. He was a poet of uncommon place: to a great extent, in a striking description, ‘a philosopher of the unphilosophical, a historian of the unhistorical and a politician of the unpolitical’ (Rée 2005:46). Given this already complicated philosophical position, the mere fact that Foucault accepted the invitation to go on the road to Tehran as a journalist could seem like opting for a treacherous road, full of traps.

Yet, consciously self-displaced as he was in Iran, Foucault did not want to be read as a lost or trapped philosopher. ‘Throughout his life, Foucault’s concept of authenticity meant looking at situations where people lived dangerously’, that unsafe realm of ‘limit experiences’ where Nietzschean ‘creativity originated’ (cf. Afary & Anderson 2005:2). In the tradition of the famous yet notorious Western contra-modern prophets of extremity, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Bataille, Foucault embraced the intellectuality that pushed the limits of rationality – and ‘he wrote with great passion in defence of irrationalities that broke new boundaries’ (Afary & Anderson 2005:2).

In 1978, Foucault found precisely that kind of morbid transgressive powers in the revolutionary figure of Khomeini and the millions who risked death as they followed him in the course of the revolution. He knew that such ‘limit experiences’ could lead to new forms of creativity and he, as his Iran writings would clearly specify, passionately threw in his support for their cause (cf. Afary & Anderson 2005:2). This was Foucault’s only first-hand experience of revolution if the protests in Tunisia in the late 1960s and the student uprising in 1968 in France are not considered to be ‘revolutions’ in the strict sense of the word. The Iranian revolution



also led to his most extensive set of writings on a non-Western society. What then, did Foucault physically encounter in that incinerator, in and on the streets of Tehran in September 1978? Moreover, what did he make of those encounters?

However, before answering that crucial question, let us deliberate for a moment on Foucault's broader interest in spirituality and religion, which was already well established in 1978 (Bernauer 2009):

Some would claim that Foucault's interest in spirituality and religion was a consequence of the Iranian encounter, but that would be to ignore many earlier signs of such concern in his writings. Certainly, Foucault's openness to the religious dynamics of the Islamic world was not only due to his erudition but also to other personal experiences. (pp. 150-151)

For example, Foucault spent a year (1958 - 1959) in Poland, where (Bernauer 2009):

[H]e witnessed the Catholic Church's strong opposition to the Communist government. John Paul II, who became pope a month before Foucault's first trip to Iran, brought that encounter to an astonishing efficiency, as was shown in the enormous expression of support for him during his trip to Poland in the second half of 1979. (p. 150)

That visit was the 'incentive for the Solidarity movement, of which Foucault became a strong public campaigner, and which possibly was one of the events that announced the coming collapse of communism' (Bernauer 2009:150; cf. May 2006:129).

Possibly even more significant for understanding Foucault's sense of religious dynamics were his visits to Brazil in the early 1970s whilst the military tyranny was in control of the state (Bernauer 2009):

He was attentive to the theologies of liberation that had come to prominence in South America at that time, whilst obviously distrustful of the many Marxist dimensions to them. Here too, he saw the Catholic Church's confrontational activism of human rights and the type of power it was capable of exercising. (p. 150)

For example, in 1975, a prominent Jewish journalist, Vladimir Herzog was killed whilst in police custody, another event in a series that had intimidated the Jewish community in Brazil. The archbishop of São Paulo decided to organise an inter denominational memorial service for the slain journalist (Bernauer 2009:150). As quoted in Bernauer (2009), Foucault noted the following:

[7]his service drew thousands and thousands of people into the church, on to the square and so on, and the cardinal in red robes presided over the ceremony, and he came forward at the end of the ceremony, in front of the faithful, and he greeted them shouting: 'Shalom, Shalom'. Also, there was all around the square armed police, as well as plainclothes policemen in the church. The police pulled back; there was nothing the police could do against that. I have to say, that had a grandeur of strength, there was a gigantic historical weight. (p. 150)

'It was the spiritual-political power of that historical weight that prepared him for Iran and generated some of his hope for its revolution' (Bernauer 2009:150). To that sense of spiritual-political power, Foucault's overall solidarity with those against authority must be taken into consideration.

The question at once arises: can philosophy develop spiritual practices of resistance against authority, without falling in the traps of totalitarianism itself? Foucault undeniably thought that philosophy could make possible a new spiritualisation of politics and political discourse. Politics and political discourse could take the form of 'messianic programs for the spiritual salvation of populations' (McGushin 2007:240). This also means that resistance could take the form of counter-practices of political spirituality. This explains Foucault's admiration for the spiritual roots of Iranian revolution – yet as well the dangerous ways this spirituality could be captured by totalitarian projects, as indeed happened in Iran in 1979. Was Foucault careful enough about this potential danger?<sup>33</sup>

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33. Note that aside his responses to the Iranian revolution, the political relation between sovereignty and power is not an issue that Foucault pursued in his later writings (Houen 2008:71). This is another element of the uniqueness of his Iran writings.

If he was not, then it was not because he underestimated the potential of the 'collective will' of Iranian people. Foucault deliberated that until his visit to Iran he had only read about that 'collective will': in Iran, he however encountered it on the streets, focused in determined opposition to the Shah. He wondered what to make of 'the vocabulary, the ceremonial, the timeless drama into which one could fit the historical drama of a people that pitted its very existence against that of the sovereign' (Foucault, cited in Rabinow 1997:xxii). Foucault was fascinated, perhaps above all, by what he saw as a call for a new subjectivity. He discerned an imperative that went beyond overthrowing yet another corrupt, Western-supported authoritarian regime, a command he had formulated thus: '[...] above all we have to change ourselves - our way of being, our relationships with others, with things, with eternity, with God' (Foucault, cited in Rabinow 1997:xxiii). He struggled with this impression, repeating a comparable suggestion on several occasions (Foucault, cited in Rabinow 1997):

What is the meaning for these people, to seek out, at the price of their lives, that thing whose very possibility we Europeans have forgotten at least since the Renaissance and the period of the great crises of Christianity - *spirituality*. I can hear the French laughing at these words, but they are making a mistake. (p. xxiii; [*emphasis in original*])

Foucault was not only deeply captivated by this 'collective will' but it was driven by a definite ethical conviction, namely his understanding of an 'ethics of freedom' (Bernauer & Mahon 2005:151-153). Foucault's urgent calls for freedom in his last works were not new to his work, but it was now presented with a new assertion and resolute urgency. In the second and third volumes of his series on *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explored a new angle of intellectual liability, and in addition to the spheres of power-knowledge interactions, he documented a precise angle of the relationship to oneself and the ways people fashion their subjectivity, that is, practices for an even deeper diffusion of normalisation and tangible opportunities for the transgression of the standardised parameters of subjectivity.

'This angle of subjectivity refers to the set of practices we perform on ourselves: for Foucault, ethics is essentially a mode of self-formation, "the ways we fashion our subjectivity"' (Bernauer & Mahon 2005:151). According to Foucault (cited in Bernauer & Mahon 2005), ethics is the:

[P]rocess in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. Also, this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. (pp. 151-152)

Within this compact expression is Foucault's idea of ethical practice and its dissimilarity to any ethics that would express itself as an abstract normative code. This view led Foucault to ask new questions about himself and about the cultures he had studied: in other words, 'How have individuals been invited or incited to apply techniques to themselves that enabled them to recognise themselves as ethical subjects?' (Bernauer & Mahon 2005:152). In other words (Bernauer & Mahon 2005):

What aspect of oneself or one's behaviour applies to ethical attention and judgement? Under what rule of conduct do people subject themselves, and how do they establish their relationship with this rule? In what type of activities do people engage in order to form themselves, to moderate their behaviour, to decipher what they are, to exterminate their desires? (p. 152)

The specific focus of Foucault's ethical concern is graspable only in the context of his project of *The History of Sexuality*, but he was also motivated by two political events, namely the Iranian revolution and his already mentioned support for the Solidarity movement in Poland (Bernauer & Mahon 2005:152). When he was criticised for his initial compassionate analysis of the Iranian revolution, Foucault refused to dismiss the moral achievement of those who participated in the revolution, precisely when it resulted in a new political repression. He spoke of this ethics as 'anti-strategic' and as 'irreducible to the question of political success' (Foucault, in Bernauer & Mahon 2005:153). This orientation to an explicitly ethical perspective was decisively

determined by his study of the Christian experience of sexuality, which he took up in the later sections of *The History of Sexuality*. He considered his involvement in Iran to be directly aligned with this philosophical discourse, as manifested during the second half of the 1970s.

It is precisely this ethical concern that brought Foucault under the impression that the revolution in Iran was at heart a human rights issue. Already in 1976 (Gane & Johnson 1993):

Foucault took action over human rights in Iran in association with Iranian activist Ahmed Salamatian. Foucault visited Iran just more than a year later, as the Shah's repression was intensifying. After talking to people from all shades of the political spectrum, he concluded that for Iran, secularisation and modernisation were *already* archaic. Opposing what he called the 'illusions' of Western analysts, he argued that modernity was experienced by Iranians not as progressive but as timeworn and corrupt. (p. 5)

Of course, liberal humanists were opposed to the Shah's brutal regime and Foucault, who never considered himself to be outside of that tradition, responded as soon as the revolution began to take a dangerous turn by condemning abuses of human rights in an open letter to Iranian prime minister (Simons 1995:11). He certainly was not blasé about the ignorance of human rights after Khomeini's *komiteh*'s took over in February 1979. His wide-ranging ethical concern for human rights at the time is demonstrated in his numerous and well-documented protests against racism, the war in Vietnam, the treatment of Soviet dissidents, and as mentioned, his involvement in the Solidarity movement in Poland, in Brazil and, in its early stages, the Iranian revolution. Later in the 1970s and early 1980s, 'Foucault was also modestly active in the gay rights movement and contributed several interviews to this political cause' (Markula & Pringle 2006:17). During this period, Foucault's political activism and writings undoubtedly 'helped to promote the perspective that one could aspire to so-called left values, whilst also being determinedly anti-Communist and anti-revolutionary (in precisely the Communist sense of the word)' (Markula & Pringle 2006:17).

In spite of these political actions, Foucault has been critiqued often for being apolitical, with the prime criticism being that his 'present histories' graphically point out a range of social problems, yet they do not supply coherent guidelines to help challenge these problems (Markula & Pringle 2006:17). Habermas (cf. Habermas & Levine 1982:21), for example, branded Foucault as a 'neo-conservative' because he failed to provide a strategy for political intervention. Foucault (1997), in response, stated:

I am sure I am not able to provide these people with what they expect. I never behave like a prophet – my books don't tell people what to do. And they often reproach me for not doing so (and maybe they are right), and at the same time they reproach me for behaving like a prophet. (p. 131)

Foucault did not believe that it was his role to tell others what to do. Indeed, he was highly critical of all the 'prophecies, promises, injunctions, and programs that intellectuals have managed to formulate in the course of the last two centuries' (Foucault 1991b:11). In contrast, he thought it more suitable to (Markula & Pringle 2006):

[P]erform critical analyses that reveal the [strengths and weaknesses in the workings of power associated with specific social practices, such as punishment or sexuality, so that individuals who were directly involved in political action could be better informed in their own design of possible strategies and actions. (p. 17)

So, how did Foucault make sense of the Iranian revolution? Was he really 'too intent to ascribe "otherness" to the Iranian revolution', by attempting (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016):

[V]ery consciously not to see the revolution through the prism of a Western conceptual toolkit, thereby Orientaliz(ing) it in a worn-out discursive universe? And by doing so, did he neglect 'to recognise "the extent to which the revolution belonged to a historical situation different from, but related to the Western context?"' (p. 74)

Or was he indeed too 'enthusiastic about any revolt that demands the ultimate sacrifice'?<sup>34</sup> By presenting and disseminating Foucault's Iran writings themselves, an attempt is made to answer in negative.

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34. Simons (1995:85): 'His admiration for the spiritual, revolutionary experience as a way of life suggests a mode of living that transcends the limits of normal life. Yet he is simultaneously aware that such existence is sustained by a momentary light that will soon die out'.

## ■ 'The army – When the earth quakes'<sup>35</sup>

In his very first article for *Corriere Della Sera*, published on 28 September 1978, Foucault set the stage for all the articles that were to follow, by hinting with subtlety at first, eventually becoming very direct, at the intervention of the Shah's army in Iranian people's everyday lives, as a modern, *panoptic* event. Through his army, the Shah was there, he saw everything, he was, in this panoptic sense, the ultimate politician (Foucault, cited in Eribon 1992):

When you arrive at the airport after curfew, a taxi takes you at breakneck speed through the streets of the city. They are empty. The only things slowing the car down are the roadblocks set up by men with machine guns. Woe betides if the driver does not see them. They shoot. All up and down the Avenue Reza Shah, silent now, as far as the eye can see, red lights and green lights flash off and on in vain, like the watch ticking on the wrist of a dead man. This is the undivided rule of the Shah. (p. 283)

Against the backdrop of the 'first painful experience' of a modern state, namely the way the early modern vision of a transparent and lucid society in France, England and Germany eventually paved way for industrial capitalism to emerge as the 'harsh and most savage society one could possibly imagine', Foucault (1979d:184-185) described the brutality and 'methodical coldness' of the Iranian army as a visible by-product of Iran's own industrial capitalism. Iran's industrialism, the hallmark of its modernisation, brought about a first-class army, which very soon became a tool of oppression in the modern sense, namely an instrument to observe and control.

Iranians had to be observed and controlled by the fifth largest army in the world at the time, a US-trained force which was organised precisely according to the same weaponry divisions and disciplinary structures as any modern Western army. Actually, Foucault noted that there were four armies: the first one for the

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35.Foucault (1978a:189-194; cf. Beukes 2009a:7).

‘surveillance and the administration of the whole territory’, the second for the ‘Shah’s protection’ (the so-called immortals, ‘his own Praetorian guard ... his Janissaries’), the third was the combat army to seek and destroy, and the fourth – 40 000 American advisors to the Shah at the time, who naturally controlled the Iranian cultural landscape with their ‘advice’. The Shah is the panoptic centre of this all-encompassing modern intervention, this observing and intervening army (Foucault 1978a:191). There was no veritable general staff in this army. Each unit was directly linked to the Shah himself, with internal police conducting tight control and surveillance amongst soldiers themselves; an army, in the last instance, was not a tool for defence against others but for ‘controlling the Self’, a ‘tool of identity’ (Foucault 1978a:191).

On Black Friday, 08 September 1978, the magnitude of this Pahlavian panopticon was demonstrated. Foucault found it significant that the unthinkable, in the modern military sense, happened on Black Friday: at least on one officially reported occasion, an Iranian officer was shot by his own men when he gave his men an order to shoot at the crowd. In the context of the Western military, disobeying an order is unthinkable. Killing an officer who is himself executing an order, is desperately taboo. Yet it happened. Some soldiers who could bring themselves to execute the order to shoot at the crowd committed suicide the next day (Foucault 1978a:193). Because the Shah was guilty of the ultimate transgression in Shia Islam – Shia soldiers shooting Shia civilians – it was to be expected that the wheel would turn, that this version of modernity would turn in against itself: ‘[s]oldier, my brother, why shoot your brother?’ (Foucault 1978c:200).

A close reading of Foucault’s first article on the position of Iranian army in September 1978 brings one to the following fundamental conclusion: Foucault was convinced that the Iranian army, as a concretisation of hyper-modernity in a country that was eager to leave modernity behind, would turn against itself; that modernity in Iran would eventually destroy itself in Iran, with tools made possible by modernity itself. Foucault thus turned the transformative moment he experienced during the Iranian



revolution into contemplation and an annotation on history. It is not implausible to think that he considered himself as one of those transformed people that the revolution generated on the streets of Tehran. He also turned the courage and the lack of distress he encountered in Tehran, as Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:57–59) argued, into an incentive for and an opportunity of considering the social world outside the dominant progressive narratives of modern teleology.

In the Iranian revolution, Foucault was thus provided with an illustration of his anti-teleological understanding of history. He understood the marching masses on the streets of Tehran as the embodiment of a political spirituality, the production of history through the transformation of the self. That is why he 'prioritised the act and experience of rebellion over the concerns about the outcome of the revolutionary movement' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:58). Foucault famously scorned all forms of developmentalist discourse, Marxist or otherwise. These views attributed to the rise of the revolutionary movement in Iran as conflicts stemming from the Shah's modernising administrations. Rather than posing a predictable antagonism between a 'particular past-orientation and a prescriptive future project, Foucault defined history as a way of reinventing the present moment. This, he believed, was the distinct strength of the revolution' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:58).

## ■ 'The Shah is a hundred years behind the times'<sup>36</sup>

How self-conscious this 'Greek in Persia' really was, becomes clear from Foucault's second article for *Corriere Della Sera*, published on 01 October 1978. This second article was even more upfront in its modern-critical orientation than the first. The initial Western interpretation of the events that were heightening the sense of crisis in 1978 in Iran was, particularly in Europe, an established one: in the liberal mind, the Shah embodied

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36. Foucault (1978b:194–198; cf. Beukes 2009a:7–8).

the positive and productive forces of Enlightenment: of 'modernisation' and 'secularisation'. The Shah, according to the up-curved dynamics of modern *telos*, had the future on his side, whilst those who opposed the Shah were considered a loose assembly of antiquated peasants and religious fanatics who had yet to adjust to the reality of the modern world.

However, Foucault made it clear in this second article that his informants in Iran saw things very differently. As far as they were concerned, their struggle was as much against corruption as against modernisation – actually, these two were perceived to be linked from the outset. The 'honest people of the West' turned a blind eye to the 'speculation, corrupt practices, embezzlement and swindling that constitute the veritable daily bread of their trade, their industry and their finances' (Rée 2005:46) – but for the protesters, a blind eye was no longer possible.

Corruption in Iran was the 'dynastys way of exercising power and a fundamental mechanism of the economy' (Rée 2005:46), the ultimate power of 'that dreadful ensemble of modernism, despotism and corruption' (Eribon 1992:283). Foucault immediately took this ensemble, this contra-modern notion, against the backdrop of his agitation for insight into the failures of the modern project on the one hand, and the acknowledgement of socio-religious particularity on the other, seriously. He consciously went against the grain of the conventional European perspective on the revolution – that 'unimaginative perspective' (Foucault 1978b; cf. Eribon 1992:283–284) which considered the revolution to be simply regressive and a free-fall back into the premodern – by accentuating the modern-critical undertones of this revolt:

There was a detail that struck me when I visited the bazaar, which had just reopened after more than a week of strikes. There were dozens and dozens of incredible sewing machines lined up in the stalls, big and elaborate the way 19th-century newspaper advertisements show them. They were decorated with drawings of ivy, climbing plants and flower buds, in crude imitation of old Persian miniatures. All these out-of-service Westernisms wearing the signs of an out-of-date East also bore the inscription: 'Made in South Korea'. I felt then that I understood that recent events did not represent a withdrawal of the

most outdated groups before a modernisation that is too brutal. It was, rather, the rejection by an entire culture, an entire people, of a modernisation that is an archaism in itself. It is the Shah's misfortune to be of one piece with this archaism. His crime is that he maintains through corruption and despotism this fragment of the past in a present that wants nothing to do with it anymore. (pp. 195, 196)

Foucault (1978b; cf. Eribon 1992:284) continued:

Modernisation as a political project and as a principle of social change is a thing of the past in Iran [...] With the current Iranian regime in its death throes, we are present at the final moments of an episode that began almost 60 years ago: The attempt to modernise Islamic countries in a European mode [...] Consequently, I beg of you, let's hear no more talk in Europe about the fortunes and misfortunes of a ruler who is too modern for a country that is too old. The Shah is what is old here in Iran. He is 50, even 100 years behind. He is as old as predatory sovereigns. His is the antiquated dream of opening up his country by means of secularisation and industrialisation. However, his project of modernisation, his despotic weapons, his system of corruption are what is archaic today. (p. 198)

Foucault (1978b:194; [*author's added emphasis*]) was in these sections of his second writing aspiring towards another political imagination, which would escape the stronghold of modernism. He did not view modernity in Iran as an *ad hoc* problem, a case of modernity being temporarily derailed by corruption, or a localised crisis of modernity, or a minor social problem, but as a problem of the crisis of *modernity itself*. It is modernisation itself that is an archaism (Foucault 1978b:194).

Foucault therefore considered the failure of modernisation in Iran as a following chapter in a series of stinging failures, which had started in the 1920s proper, namely the modernising of Islamic countries in a European fashion. If modernity was failing in Europe, as Foucault was convinced it was – should the decay of the bulwark of modernity, namely the notion of progress through the rationalisation of the life-world system, with all its corrupt and oppressive consequences, not be taken seriously? If it was clear that not even a 'reasonable modernisation', which would be willing to 'take cultural identity into account' (Foucault 1978b:196) would escape from being a 'dead weight' (Foucault 1978b:197), why not

recognise that it was modernity that was failing humanity, and not humanity failing modernity?

If it is clear that modernity, and the industrial capitalism it spawned, would always in the end boil down to a ‘gigantic (mis)appropriation of goods’ (Foucault 1978b:198), its dividends being ‘distributed like spoils’ (Foucault 1978b:198) to the Shah and, one could add, his most infamous Western peers – those slick chief executive officers, callous hedge fund managers and industrial magnates who crashed world markets in late 2008, again in a flash crash in 2010, and again in 2014 – Is it not time to recognise the failure of modernity in even the most brutal of senses, which is economical?

Foucault thus located the revolution not in any arbitrary event as another failed project of modernity but rather as confirmation that it was achievable to surpass modernity and the ‘spiritless world’ it had established. He noted that he was ceaselessly told that Iran was going through a ‘crisis of modernisation’, and that ‘a traditional society cannot and does not want to follow its arrogant monarch’ in its attempt to ‘compete with the developed nations’ of the West. The activist events in Tehran did not signify a ‘shrinking back in the face of modernisation by extremely retrograde elements’, or some ‘archaic fascism’: for Foucault, what is archaic is ‘*modernisation* itself, not the religious mode of the revolutionary expression’ (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:60).

## ■ ‘Faith against the Shah’<sup>37</sup>

This is precisely where Foucault took off in his third article for *Corriere Della Sera*, published on 08 October 1978. Juxtaposing socio-economic spaces in Tehran, describing it as a ‘divided city’, with the Hilton Hotel (and the Shah’s palace) on the one side and the ‘empty molds’ created by industrialisation, urbanisation and growing poverty amongst Iranian people on the other, Foucault (1978c:199; cf. Vahdat 2002:1–30) discusses the ways modernity fundamentally ‘displaced Iranians’ under the auspices of the Shah.

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37. Foucault (1978c:198–203; cf. Beukes 2009a:8–9).

Ironically, the urban poor had only one refuge: *the mosques* (cf. Afary & Anderson 2005:81). Modernity drove the urban poor to religious spaces where they and their children would be fed, clothed and taken care of. Foucault (1978c:199) described this modernised Iran, with its poor at the entrances of mosques, as a 'rootless geography', with nothing to offer the people of Iran and yet nothing, it seems, to answer for.

Fascinated by the spontaneous eruption of resistance against these divisions that were created by the many economic and industrial programmes of modernity, Foucault (1978c:200, 202) described this energy of resistance as a 'matter of belief', a 'simple vocabulary' and an 'elemental organization' against the injustices modernity had brought to Iran. It was not merely a sub-economical reaction from an impoverished context; instead, it was a refined and eloquent worldview against the 'worldview of this liberal, modern, Westernised regime' (Foucault 1978d:204). It seems to be 'Persia's surprising destiny' (Foucault 1978c:203), its 'peculiar destiny' (Foucault 1978d:208) to have invented the state and government at the dawn of history, yet also derived a religion which never ceased to give an 'irreducible strength to people to oppose state power' (Foucault 1978c:203).

It was in Foucault's mind that 'Persia's destiny' to become the indicator of the bankrupt nature of modernity's ruthless relation of progress and the legitimation of suffering. In this regard that religion – Shia Islam – was the keyhole and resistance the key to unlocking the door, which would lead to a different and non-modern world. Opposing modernity had become a matter of faith against the forces of modernity. Foucault (1978c:200) described how groups of unarmed demonstrators were halting government troops with shouts of 'Islam, Islam!' and again, 'Soldier, my brother, why shoot your brother? Come with us to save the Quran!'

Foucault was at first surprised to find many – but not all – left-wing, even entirely secularist students agitating for an 'Islamic government'. However, he then observed that the Shia clergy was utterly different from Catholic hierarchy: '[t]he Shia clergy is not

a revolutionary force – they mediate and facilitate a sense of being-together for the Iranian people’ (Foucault 1978c:202). The clergy had no popes or cardinals nor any centralised system of authority, and if the *mullahs* were stimulating a popular revolt against corruption, it was not because they were ‘in command’ but because they were giving ordinary Iranians precisely what they needed: ‘[a] way of being together, a way of speaking and listening, a means of understanding each other and sharing each other’s desires’ (Foucault 1978c:202).

These protesters who were calling for Islamic government explained themselves to Foucault by speaking about an ‘ideal’ fashioned from Islamic values as they understood them: the dignity of labour, respect for minorities, equality before the law and a government accountable to the people – precisely the things promised but never realised by modernity in Iran (Foucault 1978d:205). That ideal could transform thousands of forms of discontent, hatred, misery and despair into a force – it could transform them into a dynamism ‘because it is an elemental mode of social organisation, of being together, a way of speaking and listening, and being listened to’ (Foucault 1978c:202). *To listen and be listened to* – that was what Iranians were dreaming about. They imagined an Islamic government carrying that dream forward. In an interruption to his streak of articles for *Corriere Della Sera*, Foucault published an extensive article in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in the 16–22 October 1978 edition, pondering on the ‘Iranians’ dream’.

## ■ ‘What are the Iranians dreaming about?’<sup>38</sup>

Foucault (1978d) was initially startled by this ‘dream’:

It is often said that definitions of an ‘Islamic government’ are imprecise. To me, however, they seemed to have a clarity that was completely familiar and also, it must be said, far from reassuring [...] (I told them) these are simply the catchphrases of democracy – of

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38. Foucault (1978d:203–209; cf. Beukes 2009a:9–10).

bourgeois or revolutionary democracy. We in the West have been repeating them to ourselves ever since the 18th century, and look where they have got us. (p. 206)

However, the protesters immediately replied (Foucault 1978d):

These catchphrases were part of the Quran long before your philosophers adopted them; in the industrialised Christian West they may have lost their meaning, but Islam is going to restore their value and their force. (p. 206)

Foucault (Foucault 1978c, 1979c:186; cf. Eribon 1992:284) was initially not persuaded by their reflections on their dream, but as Iranian students elaborated on their dreams of an 'Islamic government', it must have struck him that he was witnessing one of his 'present histories' in action; that he was witnessing a micro-process, a particularity, a dynamic reconfiguration of rigid subject and object relations, a clear manifestation of what he recently began to refer to as political spirituality (cf. ch. 2), similar to what swept through Europe centuries earlier:

The *mullah's* shouted imprecations [...] terrible as Savonarola's must have sounded in Florence, as the Anabaptists in Münster, or the Presbyterians in Cromwell's time [...] It might not amount to a political program, but still, it was impressive in its own way. It impresses me as what you might call a 'political will' [...] It also impresses me as an attempt, in response to current problems, to politicise structures that are both social and religious. And it impresses me as an attempt to open up a spiritual dimension in politics (p. 201)

In this fourth article published in 1978, Foucault worked with two opposing idea types – that of the saint (Khomeini) and the king (the Shah). Foucault was moved by the difference in communication with Iranian people between Khomeini ('who is not there, who says nothing, who is not a politician'; Foucault 1978h:220) and the Shah (who is 'panoptically' there, who sees everything, who gives orders, who examines – who is a politician in the most modern sense of the word). How was it that one who 'is not there', who 'says nothing' and who 'is not a politician' could have such an enormous communicative ability and political effect? How did one communicate in silence, in exile?

Khomeini, Foucault argued, communicated precisely by his silence, by his non-presence, by being ‘non-political’ (or not political in the modern sense). His silence was the symbol of Iranians’ silence, and his exile had become their exile, in their own country. That is why merely his name had become a ‘rallying cry’ (Foucault 1978d:204). Khomeini’s ‘saintliness’ was to be found in the fibre of understatement embedded in the ‘mysterious current between Khomeini and the people’, which Foucault (1978d:205) admitted he found ‘intriguing’. Western observers might have stated that the Iranians said ‘what they did not want, but not what they wanted’ (Foucault 1978d:204) – yet for Foucault it was clear what they wanted. They wanted to mobilise their silence, stepping out of Khomeini’s silence, to break their exile from the marginalised position of his exile.

It is essential to state that Foucault, however intrigued he was by the uprising events, was not mesmerised by Khomeini’s image as ‘the saint of the people’: he was actually very ironic about it, precisely because the horizontal organisation of Shia clergy in his mind would not have allowed such a sanctification of one single ‘super *mullah*’, or a special breed of one of the ‘*ulamâ*’. No adoration for Khomeini as a person could be responsibly isolated in Foucault’s Iran writings.

Precisely the opposite: Foucault found the effect of Khomeini’s *non-presence* fascinating; it was Khomeini’s silent, marginalised persona within a grand historical scheme of things that mattered for him. It was the *lack* of Khomeini’s presence in the events that intrigued Foucault. Yet, Foucault strikingly *did* refrain from criticising Khomeini – not anticipating the harsh, cruel Khomeinism that would follow from February 1979 onwards. Even in October 1978, at this still unstructured, volatile stage of the revolution, one would expect Foucault, precisely from the background of his own theoretical writings on power, to have been more cautious of the potential of repression and the kind of obscurantism that Khomeini undoubtedly represented. The fact that Foucault met Khomeini shortly after Khomeini arrived in Paris on 06 October 1978 – even though it was a meeting that could only be described



as brief, inconsequential and uninteresting, given Eribon's (1992:286) report – did nothing to sensitise Foucault to what in hindsight was danger lurking in the shadows.

However, what Foucault understood to be an Islamic government was tightly knitted with his understanding of Shia Islam's non-hierarchical nature and the experience of Khomeini as non-visible and non-political in the modern sense, that Khomeini would be, as the *mullahs* already were, echoing the voices of and pastorally guiding the flock that was Iran. One could possibly refer to Foucault's perspective on the Iranian dream, besides his second take on it being as 'present-historical', which is a contra-modern notion, as 'pastoral' in the sense that he thought that the Islamic government would constitute a simple vocabulary, as simple as one would ordinarily find in pastoral relationships. Foucault (1978d) understood the notion of Islamic government in this sense as 'pastoral', as a series of elementary, horizontal relationships:

One thing must be clear – by 'Islamic government' nobody in Iran means a political regime in which a cleric or the clerics would have a role of supervision or control. To me, 'Islamic government' (points) to two orders of things: An ideal, something ancient yet very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam once was at the time of the Prophet [...] but also that distant point where it would be possible to renew identity rather than maintain obedience [...] a faith in the creativity of Islam seems to me to be essential. (p. 206)

Foucault gave no indication, at any time, that he suspected that the Islamic government that came into being on 01 April 1979 would be so drastically different from this 'pastoral' understanding of an Islamic government. It would come back to haunt him.

The dynamics of Foucault's first trip in the second half of September, as reflected in the first four articles of September and October 1978 (Foucault 1978a, 1978b, 1978c, 1978d), clearly centred around modern-critical notions, notions that were already established in many of his earlier works, from the early 1960s onwards. Foucault perceived the events in Iran to be proof of the failure of the project of modernity, even in a context

isolated geographically and socio-historically from the world of Enlightenment.

Foucault was not content merely with meeting politicians and leaders from the opposition. He spent 10 days in Iran speaking to students, people in the street, representatives of the Shah's army, and not least, the Islamic youth proclaiming that they were prepared to die (Foucault 1978a:190). He went around to the cemeteries, which were the only authorised places of meeting (Foucault 1978g:219). He went to the universities and the doors of the mosques: 'Foucault gathered information, listened, looked, always taking notes, walking everywhere – Voeltzel remember them as exhausting days' (Eribon 1992:284). Foucault asked the same question to everyone he met in the streets of Tehran: 'what do you want?' Invariably he got the same answer, an answer he considered to be a genuine modern-critical one and the basis of what has *supra* been referred to as his 'pastoral' perspective on the resistance: 'an Islamic government' (Foucault 1978d:205; cf. Miller 1993:309).

## ■ 'A revolt with bare hands'<sup>39</sup>

Foucault went back to Paris in the last week of September 1978. In France, liberal commentators were struggling to come to grips with the expressedly unmodern nature of recent events in Iran and to fit that wayward kind of 'non-political politics' into the up-curved, teleological political narrative of modernity. Iran did not present the familiar lines of a struggle between 'pure-hearted youthful rebels and dark-souled reactionaries, and it was difficult to see it as another China, Cuba or Vietnam, or a second edition of Paris 1968' (Rée 2005:46; cf. Foucault 1978e:211). These commentators nevertheless condemned Foucault's notion of political spirituality, which struck them as incredibly anachronistic; to which, again, he stated: 'I can hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong' (Foucault 1978d:209). He admitted that he knew relatively little about Iran

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39. Foucault (1978e:210–213; cf. Beukes 2009a:10).

(‘let us admit that we Westerners would be in a poor position to give advice to the Iranians on this matter’; Foucault 1978e:213; cf. Foucault 1978h:220). Yet, he was convinced that the entire Iranian population was acting like a massive ‘political hedgehog’ with a single, seemingly contradictory passion: the desire for a process that would somehow ‘prevent politics from gaining a foothold’ (Foucault 1978e:210–211). Such a movement was not sustainable, but this did not make it lamentable in Foucault’s mind. The idea of an Islamic government would settle down eventually; it would prove to be either ‘a reconciliation, a contradiction, or the threshold of something new’ – but in the interim, it was simply impossible to tell.

In his fifth Iran writing and fourth article for *Corriere Della Sera*, published on 05 November 1978, just before he returned to Iran for his second visit and at the time when the uprising was reaching its climax, Foucault described the energy of the resistance he had witnessed in the streets of Tehran based on two paradoxes. The first paradox he noted was that the uprising against that mighty modern structure, the Iranian army and police force, was brought about *without weapons*. It was carried out with ‘bare hands’, never resorting to armed struggle. The courage and determination of Iranian people brought about a dynamic which ‘froze’ the army and police (Foucault 1978e):

Two months ago, the army killed 4000<sup>40</sup> in Djaleh Square. Yesterday, 200 000 people marched in front of soldiers, who did not react [...] As the final crisis looms, recourse to violent repression seems less and less possible. The uprising of a whole society has choked off the possibility of civil war. (p. 211)

The second paradox that Foucault described was that the revolt spread *without splits* or internal conflicts. The secularists at the universities could have tried to destabilise the uprising by actively

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40. Again, this is an exaggerated number, propagated by the protesters and a number to which Foucault subscribed – thousands were indeed wounded, but it is unlikely that more than a hundred protesters were killed on Black Friday, which is, of course, already a massive loss of human life, indicating a massacre in the most rigid sense of the word and indicative of the brutality of Shah’s army.

engaging their best students in the political arena. For whatever reason, it did not happen – possibly because some of them actively joined the uprising themselves, whilst others wanted to stay out of the affair and carry on with their daily business of doing science. The Shah’s tactical release of more than 1000 political prisoners at the time could have brought the spontaneous eruption of the resistance into disarray. This too did not happen – the released prisoners simply joined the uprising, without trying to gain control over or structure it. Not even the modern industrialised sector was able to destabilise the revolt’s cohesion by offering pay raises to demonstrators. The demonstrators were by all indications ‘one’ and their revolt was not for sale, not even by some of the largest petroleum companies in the world. In this fifth article, Foucault (1978f:213–215) challenged the government forces with these two paradoxes.

However, Foucault chose not to linger with the ‘natural dissidents’ of the revolution, those who opted to stay out of the uprising – the many secularists at the universities and the business people who wanted nothing to do with it, as well as the thousands of secular women, amongst them many scientists and academics, who suddenly had to don the veil, and, ironically, ‘homosexuals’. Yes, millions took part in the uprising, but millions preferred to stay out of it too. In Foucault’s Iran writings, there was no reference to their situation. Again, this was an oversight that would come back to haunt him.

Yet, one has to understand that Foucault was convinced that everyone would be accommodated in the new dispensation, whatever form that dispensation would take and however absent long-term objectives were in the vision of protesters. Foucault (1978d) was assured that:

[W]ith respect to liberties, they will be respected to the extent that exercise will not harm others; minorities will be protected and free to live as they please on the condition that they do not injure the majority; between men and women there will not be inequality with respect to rights, but difference, since there is a natural difference. (p. 206)

One might ask, alongside the exiled feminist 'Atoussa H'<sup>41</sup>: since when, if ever, have minorities, outside clear and present terrorist contexts, harmed the majority? Foucault was however never under the impression that the secularists, in general, would be crushed in the new dispensation. Everyone he spoke to expected Khomeini to come back soon, but Foucault (1978h:222) was assured that 'there will not be a Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government'. According to Foucault (1978e), what the protesters wanted was not even a 'revolution', as Westerners understood it:

Everybody is quite aware that they want something completely 'different', something the consequences of which would come as a surprise to modern political analysts. The only certainty was that this new revolt of Islam was 'irreducible and unpredictable'. (p. 211)

## ■ 'A revolt with cassette tapes'<sup>42</sup>

Foucault's sixth article was retrospectively published in *Corriere Della Sera* on 19 November 1978, four days after he returned from his second visit to Iran. Once again, he was impressed by the way the resistance was perpetuating itself, not through military strength but the power of information. The protests were sustained by a diffused system of communication that the state could neither monitor nor control. Messages from unidentified sources were transmitted by telephone, by sermons and, above all, by what was at that time the tool *par excellence* of counter-information: the audiocassette recorder, which we today would consider a very modest apparatus, of course.

'If the Shah is about to fall, it will be due above all to the cassette tape' (Foucault 1978g:219). Foucault in this article appreciated, on a philosophical level, the spontaneous eruption of resistance to established power and the way the dissemination of information assisted the momentum of the revolution. However, there is more

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41. Atoussa (1978:209; cf. 'Foucault and "Atoussa H"' in ch. 7).

42. Foucault (1978g:216–220; cf. Beukes 2009a:10–11).

to it: again, as was the case with the army with all its modern weaponry, which eventually would be the modern tools of (self-) destruction in this modern state, the cassette tape was a product of modern industry, seemingly a modest product, yet used very effectively against the modern state.

What happened was that the military in their numerous attempts to establish censorship and silence journalists, paved the way for an entire network of information, sustained by telephones and cassette tapes, a network people perfected over 'years of obscurantism' (Foucault 1978g):

One can find, outside the doors of most provincial mosques, tapes of the most renowned orators at a low price. One encounters children walking down the most crowded streets with tape recorders in their hands. They play these recorded voices from Qom, Mashad and Ishafan so loudly that they drown out the sound of cars, passersby do not need to stop to be able to hear them [...] that is why, from town to town, the strikes start, die out and start again. (pp. 219–220)

## ■ The mythical leader of the Iranian revolt<sup>43</sup>

Foucault's last noteworthy contribution for *Corriere Della Sera* was published on 26 November 1978, at the time when the country was enveloped in a full-blown revolution, at the time it became indisputable that a semi-liberal government has changed into a full-fledged military rule over a period of less than 3 months (Foucault 1978h):

The whole country is now engulfed in revolt: the cities, the countryside, the religious centres, the oil regions, the bazaars, the universities, the civil servants, the intellectuals [...] an entire century in Iran - one of so-called economic development and modernisation - is being put into question. It is being totally rejected. (p. 220)

Now slowly appearing from the shadows of understatement was Khomeini, who the previous month left the Shia holy city of Najaf in

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43. Foucault (1978h:220–223; cf. Beukes 2009a:11).

Iraq, arriving in Paris on 06 October 1978, to spend the last months of his 15-year exile in Europe, until late January 1979. Foucault (1978h:222) described Khomeini without any reserve as the 'leader' of this otherwise leaderless revolt and therefore an 'almost mythical' figure. Although Foucault (1978d:204–205; cf. the section in this chapter titled 'What are the Iranians dreaming about?') in his fourth article reflected on Khomeini's appeal and the way he evoked solidarity in the hearts of Iranians, this seventh article focused on Khomeini's progressive visibility and importance, not merely for the clergy but for ordinary Iranians as such (Foucault 1978g):

I was impressed to hear a Boeing pilot say: 'You have now in France the most precious thing that Iran has possessed for the last century – protect it'. His tone was commanding. I was even more impressed to hear strikers of Abadan<sup>44</sup> say: 'We are not particularly religious'. I asked them: 'Whom do you trust then? A political party?' 'No, no one', they answered. 'Only one, Khomeini, and he alone'. I was impressed by it. (p. 218)

Foucault (1978h) went on:

Today, no head of state, no political leader, even one supported by the whole media of his country, can boast of being the object of such a personal and intense attachment [... which is the] result of three things: Khomeini *is not there*. For the last fifteen years, he has been living in exile and does not want to return until the Shah has left. Khomeini *says nothing*, nothing other than *no ...* to the Shah, to the regime, to dependency. Finally, Khomeini *is not a politician* [...]. There will not be a Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government. (p. 222)

In this particular passage, Foucault is philosophically at his most vulnerable over the nine months during which his Iran texts were written. Khomeini was sent into exile in June 1963, after he publicly compared the Shah to Yazid, the Umayyad caliph who ordered the murder of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet, calling the Shah a 'Jew'. His imprisonment, with some 30 other '*ulamâ*' then had caused large-scale demonstrations, the subsequent repression resulting in

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44. Referring to the strikers at oil refineries in Abadan, who put the growing tension in Iran on the Western map months before Black Friday on 08 September 1978.

at least 100 deaths (Rodinson 1978:235). Although Khomeini was not present physically in Iran since 1963, that which is now considered to be general knowledge for political researchers of Islam must be stated, namely that Khomeini was in effect governing Iran from exile since at least the early 1970s (cf. Momen 1987:246–299).

Actually, a subversive, underground and self-perpetuating network of resistance was put into place at the time Khomeini was exiled in 1963, and it was carefully orchestrated from outside by Khomeini as well as his many cadres. These cadres included some prominent leftist intellectuals in Iran, who supported Khomeini to develop his ‘blueprint for an Islamist revolution’. Afary and Anderson (2005:59) indicated that Jalal Al-Hamad (1923–1969), author of the classic 1963 book, *Plagued by the West*, was the first leftist to join ranks with Khomeini, furthering the cause of the revolution that followed 15 years later. Khomeini moved relatively freely between the domicile of his exile, Iraq, and the domicile of his power, Iran. The reality was that Khomeini was in a far more favourable political position staying outside than had he been in Iran. Had he been in Iran, he would have simply become the opposition in terms of the binary logic and dynamics of modern politics.

However, being in exile allowed Khomeini to oppose without, in fact, becoming the opposition. The fact that Foucault did not encounter the ‘phenomenon Khomeini’ in the streets of Tehran in 1978, yet met with the reality that Khomeini was precisely present in his absence, and was actually lobbying in his absence, thus facing a ‘noumenal Khomeini’, absent yet spookily present in those streets. This served as a proof of how really effective was the subverted organisation of Khomeini’s political profile, and how sophisticated was the network of ‘cassette tapes’ that Foucault himself had witnessed and reported on.<sup>45</sup> Foucault underestimated

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45. The following commentaries on social and political developments towards the revolution confirm the political realities underlying this statement: Abrahamian (1982:496–530, 1993:60–87), Arjomand (1989:91–176), Esposito (2003:26–70), Hiro (2000:103–135), Kinzer (2003:119–133), Martin (2003:100–165), Milani (1994:59–104), Momen (1987:246–299) and Mortimer (1982:296–376).



the complexity of the kind of politics Khomeini was practising, indeed from outside. He also underestimated to what extent Khomeini himself, however untypical, had become as a modern politician whilst still in exile; and to what extent Khomeini himself observed, controlled, normalised and examined the events in Iran.<sup>46</sup>

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46. All sections in Chapter 6 represent a substantial reworking of Beukes (2009a:108-115), now re-evaluated against the backdrop of and aligned with the basic tenets of Ghamari-Tabrizi's (2016:57-74) recent exegesis. Beukes (2009a) was published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence, according to which permission is granted for reworking.

# The backlash: Paris in turmoil, April 1979

**Keywords:** ‘Atoussa H’; Ayatollah Khomeini; Mehdi Bazargan; Claudie Broyelle; Jacques Broyelle; Foucault and feminism; governmentality; Islamic government.

## ■ Foucault and Khomeini

It is evident from Foucault’s Iran writings, as disseminated in Chapter 6, that he was convinced that an ‘Islamic government’ could not restrict people’s rights because the government was bound by religious duty: the people will accordingly know what to do because it is ‘the right thing to do’, in the religious sense. He was seriously mistaken.

Why did Foucault compromise on the characteristic cynical nature of his views on the cunning ways people are ‘governed’ in the modern world and did he fail to view Khomeini’s ‘non-presence’ as a ‘form of political presence’; how could he maintain his views on Khomeini as a ‘non-politician’ and a rather ‘mystical figure’, is difficult to understand in the light of his own crucial

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theoretical position regarding power as anonymous and 'everywhere'. Had his theories on 'governmentality' not taught precisely the opposite of what he said about Khomeini 'not being there', about Khomeini being 'disengaged from external domination and internal politics?' (Foucault 1978h:222; cf. Beukes 2009a:11). If it is true that the prevalence of the political influence of the Iranian '*ulamâ*', who constituted a sort of religious party, 'astonished everyone' (Rodinson 1978:233), why did it not astonish Foucault?

Is it possibly because Khomeini had become for him the 'personification of Nietzsche's "will to power"', a ruthless historical figure with 'saintly self-mastery', the perfect example of going beyond Nietzsche's 'ascetic priest', as Afary and Anderson (2005:14, cf. 36-37) rather polemically contested? Although one could be apprehensive of this somewhat affected, forced Nietzschean interpretation, it must be conceded that Foucault's reluctant, hesitant disposition towards Khomeini was and still is, at least for those who attempt to interpret his lifework as meaningful, a mystery.

Foucault himself indicated that Khomeini says nothing except 'no': how does a philosopher who is so exceptionally hermeneutical otherwise, accept that 'no' as unproblematic, as a given premise? How can the refusal to say 'yes' to anything, in principle, be philosophically justifiable within any 'discursive practice', to use Foucault's own words? Whilst it is correct on the one hand that Foucault found the perfect context for illustrating his own revolt against Western 'governmentality' in an actual revolution, that of the Iranians, one that seemed to despise modern Western 'governmentality' as much as he did, it now, in hindsight, seems possible and even likely on the other hand that he underestimated the way Western 'governmentality' was internalised by Khomeini himself. It should come as no surprise then that Lilla (2003:1-17, 137-158) felt compelled to rather audaciously juxtapose Heidegger's position in 1933 and Foucault's position in late 1978, implicitly asking both Heidegger and Foucault the same question: how could you *not* have foreseen?

In Foucault's case, it was impossible to 'have foreseen': he was a philosopher – and not a prophet. The juxtaposition of Foucault and Heidegger, and by implication Khomeini and Hitler, is seriously off the mark. Furthermore, whilst Heidegger's loyalist position had no philosophical basis whatsoever, Foucault's critique of modernity, specifically as presented in his Iran writings, provided a clear and solid philosophical basis for his involvement in the Iranian revolution. It could be argued that Foucault possibly overburdened the critical mass of his own critique of modernity in the process. But in his Iran writings, Foucault set himself up against the same old Europe which gave birth to, nourished and embraced Enlightenment: does it not speak for itself that this 'Enlightenment' was going to fail in any context where there was an 'other-posed' resistance to the project of modernity, as Foucault repeatedly emphasised in his writings?<sup>47</sup>

It seems however, as far as Khomeini's political position was concerned, that Foucault was indeed mistaken. Even if he did not support the person 'Khomeini' but was only recording the resistance against the 'politics of the present', which the person 'Khomeini' was part of; even if it is true that he never supported any of the developments in early 1979 whatsoever, Foucault's last article (cf. the section on 'The mythical leader of the Iranian revolt') in 1978 for *Corriere Della Sera* paved the path for the intense criticism he was subjected to in France and the broader intellectual community in the years thereafter.

Yet, it must be stressed that Foucault never supported Khomeini, because the Iran writings themselves do not support that conclusion: being 'uncritical' is something utterly different from being 'supportive'. Foucault could have been more forthright in keeping his distance from what Khomeini represented, but he did not make a mistake by being in Iran or writing about the revolution from a modern-critical perspective.

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47. For example, in Foucault (1978a:194, 1978b:196, 1978c:201, 1979c:184-186).

As indicated earlier, events in Iran got entirely out of hand after the initial revolutionary spurs that lasted from September to November 1978. Whilst there was outspoken resistance from the outset in France against the tone of Foucault's Iran writings in its support for the revolting masses, his experiment in political journalism met with immense hostility from the French press by April 1979. Maxime Rodinson, a respected Marxist scholar of Islam at the time, informed Foucault in an extensive essay, published on the front page of *Le Monde* in the 06 – 08 December 1978 edition, that a cruel future awaited Iran and that an Islamic government was bound to implement some archaic fascism (Rodinson 1978):

The scope of the meaning of a 'Muslim government' is vast [...] the term can cover different, even diametrically opposed, regimes. Governments can make mutual accusations of the betrayal of 'true' Islam. Nothing is easier or more dangerous than this time-honoured custom of dubbing your adversary an 'enemy of God' [...] it is indeed unwise that so many regimes have declared themselves 'Islamic' [...] it is quite possible that the men of this religion will present a somewhat more modern, concrete and persuasive form of Islam. (pp. 237-238)

This statement confirms the suggestion made above about Khomeini's political position being awkwardly 'modern'. Later, Rodinson (2005) stated:

Foucault, this very great thinker, part of a line of radically dissident thought had enormous gaps in his knowledge of Islamic history that enabled him to transfigure the events in Iran, to accept for the most part the semitheoretical suggestions of his Iranian friends, and to extrapolate from this the imagining of an end of history that would make up for disappointments in Europe and elsewhere [...] at the very least, Foucault wanted to announce the introduction of satisfactory political and social measures towards his humanist ideal, due to the workings of his notion of 'political spirituality' [...] this notion had at a very early stage shown that it operated by no means in the humanist sense that had been attributed to it, very naively, by Foucault. (p. 274)<sup>48</sup>

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48. In Chapter 8, an effort was made to highlight a difference of opinion to that of Rodinson's: the question is, did Rodinson himself understand Foucault's concept 'political spirituality'? Given this citation, read against the exposition in Chapter 2, it does not seem to be the case.

## ■ Foucault and ‘Atoussa H’

The aforementioned exiled Iranian feminist, sobriqueted as ‘Atoussa H’, who was to some extent the silent informant of Afary and Anderson’s comprehensive study on Foucault’s involvement in Iran, claimed that Foucault’s ‘self-centred’ (if not, then his implicit ‘Orientalist’, according to her) theoretical perpetuation of his notion of political spirituality was ‘blinding’ him, ‘like many other Westerners’, to the inherent injustices of Islam, especially towards women (‘Atoussa H’ 1978; cf. Rodinson 1978:237):

I am profoundly upset by the untroubled attitude [...] of some French leftists toward the possibility of an ‘Islamic government’ that might replace the bloody tyranny of the Shah [...] Michel Foucault seems moved by the ‘Muslim spirituality’ that would advantageously replace, according to him, the ferocious capitalist dictatorship that is tottering today [...] Spirituality? A return to deeply rooted wellsprings? Many Iranians like me are distressed and desperate about the thought of an ‘Islamic government’. We know what it is [...]. merely the cover for feudal or pseudo-revolutionary oppression [...] do not be seduced by a cure that is worse than the disease. (p. 209)

The problem is of course that ‘Atoussa H’ herself, being in exile, was completely alienated from Iranian society as it presented itself through the course of 1978. She gave no impression of an understanding of how widespread the support for Khomeini and the possibility of an Islamic government actually was. The ‘many Iranians’ she refers to, were really not that many: they were in fact quite few. Foucault’s reaction was therefore justifiably hostile, arguing that ‘Atoussa H’ did ‘not read the article’, or if she did, merged ‘all the potentialities of Islam within a single expression of contempt’ (Foucault 1978i:210). He had a valid point: either she did not read the article, or she misread it quite dramatically.

Unfortunately, the reception history itself would underscore those ‘potentialities’: a caricature of Foucault was systematically being set up in France. What is more, the tragic and murderous events in the first quarter of 1979 seemed to be vindicating Foucault’s critics. As mentioned earlier, the Shah fled Iran in the early weeks of 1979, Khomeini returned in triumph and the Islamic

republic was confirmed in a popular referendum on 01 April 1979. Only *then* it became clear that the events in Iran constituted a classic case of reactionary authoritarian populism. Many of the possibilities that Foucault had argued for in his writings from September 1978 onwards were coming to nothing – no transgression of the failure of Enlightenment, no uniqueness, no innovative reconfiguration of subject-object relations, no particularity, and especially, no surprises. However, there was absolutely no way Foucault could have foreseen it.

Indeed, if ‘political debate is not grounded in theoretical frameworks, it is fair to ask to what authority it does appeal’ (Gutting 2005a:29). Frequently, of course, we can get along without fostering enquiries about the decisive validation of political principles; those truthful enquiries of how to reach particular objectives that are positioned against the framework of implied joint commitments. In such cases, the issues are normally those involving practical modification rather than fundamental revolt. According to Gutting (2005a:29–30), Foucault, however, rejected the separability of questions of reform working within an established system and the revolutionary critique of that system:

Discussing with Didier Eribon the election of François Mitterrand’s socialist government in 1981, Foucault resisted Eribon’s suggestion that his sympathy with the opening initiatives of the new regime meant that he thought it would be possible to work with this government. (p. 29)

He rejected ‘the dilemma of being either for or against’ and went on to argue that even reformist projects (within a system) require ‘criticism (and indeed radical criticism)’ because any reform worthy of the name requires questioning modes of thought that say it is impossible (Gutting 2005a:29). Accordingly, we cannot choose between ‘an inaccessible radicality’ and ‘the necessary concessions to reality’ (Gutting 2005a:29). Instead, ‘the work of deep transformation or reform should be done in the open and always turbulent atmosphere of a continuous revolutionary criticism’ (Foucault 1979b:263–267; cf. Gutting 2005a:29).

This position further strengthens the question of what grounds fundamental criticisms of existing regimes, because for Foucault such criticism should be a constant of political life, and not just of exceptional moments of revolutionary disruption. We can get a sense of Foucault's response precisely via his position on the Iranian revolution. It must be stressed that Foucault's (Foucault 1979b; cf. Gutting 2005a:30) sympathy was with *the essential act of revolt*:

[T]he impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says 'I will no longer obey' and throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust. (p. 265)

Such an act is for Foucault 'irreducible' and even an 'escape' from 'history, and its long chains of reasons'. The decision 'to prefer the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey' is the 'last anchor point' for any assertions of rights, for him, 'one that is more solid and closer to experience than (even) natural rights' (Foucault 1979b:266–267; cf. Gutting 2005a:30).

The consequent and fundamental question is: what is the status of this will to revolt? Undoubtedly, there is a kind of genuineness in the acceptance of death as the possible price of freedom, but as Foucault asked: 'is one right to revolt, or not?' Foucault (1979b:263; cf. Gutting 2005a:30). At least in this context, Foucault avoided answering with a verdict: 'let us leave the question open. People do revolt; that is a fact [...] A question of ethics? Perhaps. A question of reality, without a doubt' (Foucault 1979b:268; Gutting 2005a:29–30). All Foucault was willing to say is that it is only through such revolt that 'subjectivity is brought into history' making human lives not just a matter of biological evolution but authentically historical – and that his duty as an intellectual is 'to be respectful when a singularity revolts, intransigent as soon as power violates the universal' (Foucault 1979b:268; Gutting 2005a:30).

Some may argue that it is not a very pleasing reaction, 'especially when we recollect that the revolution in question is one that led directly to a tyranny of stonings and severed hands' (Gutting 2005a:30). Foucault (1979b:266) did acknowledge that the Iranian revolution contained, from the outset, spores of its



brutalities: '[...] the formidable hope of making Islam into a great civilisation once again', always carried the possibility of a 'virulent xenophobia'. He (Foucault 1979b:268) insisted, however, that 'the spirituality which had meaning for those who went to their deaths has no common measure with the bloody government of an integrist clergy' (Gutting 2005a):

But wasn't the spirit of revolt equally present in those who died and those who lived to tyrannise? Moreover, isn't there every reason to think that a reversal of fates would have turned the martyrs into clerical tyrants? How can we be 'respectful' of revolts that we have every reason to think will lead to a new tyranny? (pp. 30, 31)

Foucault (1979b:267) remarked that there is no inconsistency 'when today one is against severed hands, having yesterday been against the tortures of the SAVAK':<sup>49</sup> 'But why respect a movement opposing the SAVAK when you know that it will lead to equal outrages?' (Gutting 2005a:31).

In other contexts, Foucault uses the category of the 'intolerable' (Gutting 2005a:30) to portray circumstances that provide justifiable reasons for revolt. This category allows us to distinguish some examples of revolt as morally proper (in the sense that they oppose what is 'intolerable') and others as not. Foucault's respect for the initial stages of the Iranian revolution reflected 'his reluctance to judge a case of obviously sincere commitment that he *knew* he could not know from the inside' (Gutting 2005a:31). Apparently, he would act otherwise about developments within his own culture, where he would be in a position to evaluate whether or not what they opposed was 'intolerable'. But there is no doubt that he would have seen such an evaluation as itself 'an irreducible given', and not the conclusion of (Gutting 2005a):

[7]he application of the theoretical categories of a political or (another) ethical framework. In the end, there can be 'no authority other than the judgement of those who directly experience a situation. (p. 31)

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49. Foucault (1979b:267). The SAVAK was the infamous 'National Organization for Security and Intelligence', effectively a security police force, in operation during the Shah's regime.

## ■ Foucault and the Broyelles

This is pertinently *not* what Foucault's critics in France understood at the time. Even the prominent French leftists Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, for many years amongst Foucault's closest allies in a broad spectrum of activist endeavours in France, finally called on him in a venomous article on the front page of *Le Matin*, on 24 March 1979, to 'confess his errors' (Broyelle & Broyelle 1979:249). The Broyelles were extremely hostile, their tirade representative of the viciousness Foucault had to bear towards the end of May 1979. Their rant is important though because it shows just how resentful the attacks from a turmoiled Paris was at the time (Broyelle & Broyelle 1979):

Today there are little girls all in black, veiled from head to toe; women stabbed precisely because they do not want to wear the veil, summary executions for homosexuality [...] women merely suspected of adultery, flogged [...] Michel Foucault's 'saint', 'the destitute exile', 'the man who rises up with bare hands', his 'Ayatollah Khomeini', ruined it all. What form was this Islamic government supposed to have taken (according to Foucault)? 'Absence of hierarchy in the clergy [...] the importance of purely spiritual authority [...] the echoing and guiding role the clergy must play [...] the Islamic fashion over and against the stupidity of Western democracies [...] very old yet very far in the future [...]'. (What we see in Iran now are) spontaneous armed groups, or otherwise 'benevolent' Islamic committees that 'counterattack' and take immediate revenge – this is the people's justice for which Michel Foucault so passionately yearned [...]. This philosopher contents himself with painting and offering images, holy images: the abridged illustrated imam, sequel to the hurried marabout of 'people's justice'. This philosopher is no more responsible than Léon Daudet for the Holocaust, or the Western communist intellectuals for the gulags [...] When one is an intellectual, when one has the freedom – without having to fight at the risk of one's life in order to obtain it – not to be a sycophantic writer, then one has also some obligations. The first one is to take responsibility for the ideas one has defended when they are finally realised. This philosopher should say 'Long live the Islamic government!' and it would be clear that he is going to the final extreme of his radicalism. Or he should say 'No, I did not want that, *I was mistaken* – here is what was wrong with my reasoning, here is where my thinking is in error'. He should reflect. After all, that is his job. (pp. 247–249; [*emphasis in original*])

No wonder Foucault was injured on a profound level by this and similar other public outcries against his ‘championing of the people’s justice, of Khomeini’s bloodshed’. He reacted the next day swiftly, his philosophical grace still intact (Foucault 1979c):

I will not react to these accusations: I have never in ‘my life’ taken part in polemics, and I have no intention of beginning now. There is another reason why I will not react based on principles. I am summoned to ‘acknowledge my errors’. This expression and the practice it designates remind me of something and many things, against which I have fought. I will not lend myself to a manoeuvre whose form and content I detest: *You are going to confess, or you will shout ‘Long live the assassins!’*. I am anxious to debate the question of Iran – yet Blanchot teaches that criticism begins with attention, good demeanour and generosity’. (pp. 249–250; [*emphasis in original*])

The fact that the Broyelles had themselves been ‘zealous, pro-Chinese Maoists a few years earlier’ (Almond 2007:34), did not bypass Foucault’s ever-present sense for irony.

## ■ Foucault and Bazargan

Indeed, Foucault initially still endeavoured to further debate the ‘question of Iran’. In April 1979, he published an open letter to the new Iranian prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* on 14 April 1979, expressing dismay at the violation of human rights under what was now clearly a ‘government of *mullahs*’. He also wrote two last articles for *Corriere Della Sera* in April and May 1979 (Foucault 1979a, 1979b), attempting to provide a coherent and sensible overview of the stark developments in Iran. Things indeed turned out for the worse in Iran, but he stressed that it did not invalidate his opinions about how they might have been different; nor did it show that the events were *not* inherently modern-critical – which was Foucault’s central position – with a capacity to ‘surprise the Western world’.

During March, April and May 1979, Foucault was constantly on the defence, not yielding an inch to his critics in Paris. Despite their accusations, he was resolute that he had *not* advocated an Islamic government, but that he had simply recorded some of the aspirations

of the protesters, whilst trying to use the events in Iran as a platform for an ongoing critique of modernity, precisely in an attempt to dismantle the modernistic notions put forward by Western observers, in France, mainly: ‘the problem of Islam as a political force is an essential one for our time and for the years to come [...] and we cannot approach it with a minimum of intelligence if we start from a position of hatred’ (Foucault 1978i:210).

During the middle of May 1979, Foucault started to withdraw from further public discussions surrounding the Iran issue. He was appalled by many other arrogant summonses to confess his ‘mistake’. He was surprised and wounded by the scorn of his critics, and at the end of May 1979, he retired from the conflict altogether. Foucault’s adventure as a controversial political journalist had now come to an end. In the five years he had left, he seldom took further part in extra-academic public discourses – and he never spoke publicly about Iran again (Eribon 1992:295).

Is this now the end of the line for any attempt to understand ‘Foucault in Iran?’ How can we further interpret the factuality of the 10 direct questions posed in the Introduction (see ‘Foucault in Iran: Ten direct questions’) – even if the tentative ‘answers’ provided in the final chapter (see ‘Foucault in Iran: Ten tentative answers’ in ch. 10) are accepted and stand undisputed, what can we do with their status as *given*? Can we work with those questions as premises for deepening our understanding of Foucault’s involvement in Iran? Yet of course, what are those questions not stating? What are the deeper nuances we should take to heart and come to grips with? What is the philosophical potential engraved on both sides of the coin – Foucault’s perceptiveness about some of the events in Iran, as well as his naïveté about other events?

The next chapters venture to move closer to a nuanced interpretation of both sides of that coin, trying to understand Foucault’s precarious position during and after the revolution, defending his basic modern-critical orientation and notion of political spirituality – whilst attempting to shelter Foucault’s philosophical elegance and refinement.



# Crucial perspectives from the Foucault scholarship, 1979–2017

**Keywords:** Janet Afary; Ian Almond; Kevin Anderson; Didier Eribon; Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi; Marnia Lazreg; Michiel Leezenberg; David Macey; James Miller; Danny Postel.

## ■ ‘Seduced?’

It should be clear by now that Foucault developed a series of unique political and theoretical positions on the Iranian revolution. These positions, until two decades ago, have been consistently understated and remain to this day relatively subdued in broader Foucault research. Again, 9/11 changed everything – and the 21st-century Foucault scholarship is no exception (Kinzer 2008:ix–xxv). Iraq is, for all practical purposes, today a destroyed country, not only by the initial attacks of American warplanes and artillery – and, of course, the hostile

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American presence as such – but also by internal Shia and Sunni violence. Iraq’s dominantly Shia sister, Iran, is a constant international focal point because of its highly dubious nuclear programme and its provocative challenges of global peace. Washington, particularly today, two years after the election of Donald Trump as the US president in 2016, seems more fragile than New York, Washington and US airspace on that fateful Tuesday ever was. On the other side, Tehran appears in the first few months of 2020 to be more viperous and restless than ever – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was not a mere contingency. Yet, Washington is the one which will be on the offensive – it is Washington that will be on the attack, as it always has been, whether in Korea, Vietnam or in countless clandestine operations all over the world in the second half of the 20th century. Those covert operations included the manipulation and control of the state of Iran from 1953 to 1978.

The previous chapter sketched the extremely negative caricature of ‘Michel Foucault, the champion of Khomeini’s bloodshed’. This distortion should relentlessly and at all costs be countered. Furthermore, a reassessment of the initial, later and contemporary receptions, as well as the philosophical significance of Foucault’s writings on Iran, in light of the events of 9/11, military operations in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, Tehran’s ongoing nuclear programme and the many brutal attacks on the West by the so-called ‘radicalised Muslims’ over the past decade,<sup>50</sup> has become urgent and consequential. With all its possible Orientalist undertones, it has thus become vital to revisit Foucault’s Iran-mediated take on ‘Oriental Otherness’ in light of the terrible events in New York, Washington and US airspace on that ill-fated day in September 2001, the Second War on Iraq, the more recent events regarding Iran’s nuclear fixations and the many merciless acts of terror from radical enclaves in the Middle East.

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50. Madrid 11 March 2004, and in chronological sequence, Stockholm 11 December 2010, Boston 15 April 2013, Paris 07 January and 23 November 2015, Brussels 22 March 2016, Berlin 19 December 2016, Manchester 22 May 2017, London 03 June 2017 and Barcelona 17 August 2017 – to name just a few of the most prominent attacks on Western cities over the past decade.

The ‘problem of the East’, it seems, is now more than ever in the West. As convinced as Postel (2006:15) was 13 years ago, during the most tempestuous period of the second Bush administration, that an attack on Iran was possible, an attack on or a provoked attack from Iran should today be considered to be a genuine probability, precisely because a far more unpredictable and reckless politician than any of his predecessors now holds the highest office in the most powerful country in the West, and indeed, in the world.

In direct reaction to the events of 11 September 2001, prominent commentator, French banker and philosopher Alain Minc (2001:1, 15), in an intriguing contra-Baudrillard and otherwise thought-provoking article, bitterly and polemically referred to ‘Michel Foucault, the advocate for Iranian Khomeinism in 1979, who was therefore theoretically in solidarity with its exactions [...]. Those harsh words appeared in a front-page article in *Le Monde*. There is in general still a great deal of a similar ignorance and malicious slander involved, often describing Foucault as the ‘philosopher who energetically endorsed the Iranian revolution and the regime it produced’ (Minc 2001:15). This statement and these kinds of statements simply are not correct. Yes, Foucault *did* endorse the revolution but as was pointed out in the previous chapters, he did so on very specific modern-critical grounds. Furthermore, according to the presentation of his Iran writings (cf. in ch 6, from ‘The army – When the earth quakes’ up to and including ‘The mythical leader of the Iranian revolt’), Foucault clearly did *not* endorse Khomeini’s understanding of what an ‘Islamic republic’ should be; however, his apparently uncritical perspective on Khomeini’s ‘non-political political position’ was problematic in that it was precisely against the backdrop of his theoretical writings on power, as well as his rather unquestioning understanding of clergy organisation in Shia Islam, being ‘non-hierarchical’.

Although an artificial distinction to some extent, these two considerations – Foucault’s support for the revolution and the uncritical or incautious interpretation of Khomeini’s position –



should be kept apart as far as possible. Following this line, the upcoming chapters argue, alongside some but also against recent receptions in the scholarship, that Foucault's Iran writings were not arbitrary, but in fact closely related to his general theoretical writings on the discourses of power and the inherent risks of modernity; that these writings were stylistically unique, yet by their very nature appealed to philosophical contributions to Foucault's oeuvre in particular and, again, to the philosophical critique of the project of modernity in general.

Older receptions of Foucault have consistently depicted his Iranian writings as anomalous, as a gross political and ethical mistake, even if Foucault did not (*could* not) foresee the extremely adverse reaction to those writings, even if he did have another objective, however unclear that objective might have been at the time. Foucault's three pivotal biographers of the 1990s, Didier Eribon (1992), James Miller (1993) and David Macey (1993, 2004), isolated Foucault's Iran expeditions as an event that may indeed have repercussions for a deepening understanding of the Foucault legacy – yet they were all outspokenly sceptical about setting the issue straight and very aloof about trying to mend Foucault's 'wounded reputation'.

Eribon (1992:281–295) wrote extensively on this episode and provided for the first time in the Foucault literature a balanced and nuanced account of its biographical and intellectual-historical relevance. Yet, Eribon gave a clear signal that Foucault had made a mistake, already by merely *accepting* the offer to go to Iran, thereby eventually – very soon, within months actually – compromising his stature as Europe's leading intellectual in the 1970s. Throughout his deliberations, Eribon articulately elaborated that the incident had wounded not only Foucault's reputation but also Foucault himself on a personal and intellectual level: in the five years Michel Foucault had left to live, he would never again deal publicly with politics and social commentary – he simply distanced himself from it, traumatised until his death by the hostile reception of his Iran writings.

Miller (1993:306–318), in a rigorous yet highly cynical account, provided the scholarship with the presumed philosophical tenets

of Foucault's visits to Iran and a solid platform for the English-speaking world, promoting ongoing investigations into the intellectual relevance of the event. For example, Miller (1993:307, 313) was the only one of these three biographers from the 1990s to suggest that Foucault's philosophical fascination with death played a part in his enthusiasm for the Iranian Islamists, with their emphasis on mass martyrdom. Miller (1993:309, 312) nevertheless concluded that the Iran episode reflects a 'tragic error' in judgement, a 'folly' over which Foucault remained 'unrepentant'. Foucault, fascinated by the subjects of dying, pain, madness and limits, often linked up with surrealist and avant-garde intellectuals such as Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot (Lilla 2003):

In them, Foucault saw the possibility of exploring personally what lay outside the bounds of ordinary bourgeois practice, to seek what he called 'limit experiences' in eroticism, madness, drugs, sadomasochism and even suicide. (p. 141)

Macey's (1993:406–411) account was possibly the most sympathetic of all three accounts from the 1990s, although it was still clearly reserved about any possible merit of Foucault's involvement in the conflict. Macey regarded the French attacks on Foucault over Iran as exaggerated and often malicious: yet he is clear about his conviction that Foucault was so 'impressed' by what he saw in Iran in 1978, that he sadly 'misread the probable future developments he was witnessing' (Macey 1993:410). In his later, shorter monograph on Foucault, Macey (2004:128) implied that the event had only a marginal effect on the reception and understanding of Foucault, stating that 'in fairness, he [Foucault] was not the only one to misread the situation'. Macey was thus fair and balanced in his summary of the Iran issue regarding its impact on Foucault's oeuvre, but still very sceptical about re-interpreting the event in a more productive philosophical way. *Foucault made a mistake*. Even for Macey, that is the end of a disastrous story. Nothing could change 'Foucault's mistake', and it would be unproductive to further consider the issue. One may add that a fourth biographer, Jeanette Colombel, a close associate and friend of Foucault, in her untranslated French monograph

also refers, albeit with considerable understatement, to his ‘error’ in Iran and confirmed that the incident ‘wounded’ him (Afary & Anderson 2005:7).

Early 21st-century receptions were far more inclined to revisit the issue. Yet, it has to be noted that the authoritative biographies from the 1990s, however unconvinced about any philosophical merit regarding this issue, paved the way for this renewed interest, especially so in the light of the terrible events of 9/11, the Second Iraqi War and the way the issues of reconfigured power, the ‘West-East divide’ and Foucault’s notion of political spirituality are approached in the first two decades of the 21st century: because Tehran’s unique self-esteem is still radiating brighter than ever in the desert skies.

Because only three of Foucault’s final 15 articles on the Iranian revolution (and none of his interviews with exiles, *mullahs* and demonstrators) have appeared in English before Afary and Anderson (2005:181–277) translated and republished all of these articles and a significant number of these interviews, they had in the previous three decades generated little discussion in the English-speaking world. Apart from those biographies by Eribon, Miller and Macey, elsewhere in the English-speaking world, where Foucault’s writings on Iran have only been scarcely translated and the French responses to him at the time not translated at all, his Iran excursion and the writings stemming from this excursion have been treated with far less hostility.

His last two articles on Iran, for instance (Afary & Anderson 2005:181–277), where he eventually made a few criticisms of the Islamic regime in the face of the attacks on him by prominent French intellectuals, have in fact been the most widely circulated ones amongst those that have appeared in English up to 2005. They were also the only English examples of his Iran writings to be found in a three-volume collection entitled *The Essential Writings of Michel Foucault* up to 2005 (cf. Foucault 2000). To this day, relatively few scholars outside the French-speaking world have realised exactly *how* hostile, such as the Broyelles’

response, the French reactions towards Foucault were and how sensitive and consequential this matter really still is in Foucault scholarship. Yet, reactions from the English-speaking world, however sporadic, were sometimes very hostile as well: '[...] [Foucault's Iran writings are] a symptom of something troubling in the kind of left-wing thinking that mixes postmodernism, simplistic thirdworldism and illiberal inclination' (the political theorist Mitchell Cohen, cited in Afary & Anderson 2005:7).

The characteristic and shared feature of the commentaries that recognised the importance of this issue for Foucault's legacy is that he was somehow 'seduced'. Whilst that is an implied notion in the perspectives of his commentators and biographers from the last decade of the 20th century, it is overtly and unambiguously so – already in the title – in Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson's (2005) then groundbreaking book on Foucault in Iran, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*. The author is now far more guarded than in 2009 of the risks involved in reading Foucault as having been 'seduced' by either Islamism or Khomeinism, or both (cf. Beukes 2009b:118, fn. 4).

Afary and Anderson radicalised this notion of 'seduction' and a 'seduced Foucault', but not without providing a noteworthy initial contribution to Foucault research, on at least four levels: firstly, their work provided the scholarship with the most thorough account, up to Ghamari-Tabrizi's work of 2016, of the prologue to Foucault's two expeditions to Iran, the expeditions itself and the immediate aftermath of those expeditions.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, the Afary and Anderson volume (2005:181–277) provided the first systematic overview, analysis and annotation of all of Foucault's Iran writings, embedding them into the broader Foucaultian corpus, however not without problems. Thirdly, for the first time, Foucault's Iran writings were translated into English and annotated *in toto* by the authors (and Karen de Bruin) and

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51. Afary and Anderson (2005:38–68, 69, 105–137; cf. Amsler's review, 2006:521).

presented in one single compilation. Because only three of Foucault's final 15 articles on the Iranian revolution (and again, none of his interviews with exiles, *mullahs* and demonstrators) had appeared in English before Afary and Anderson (2005:181–277) translated and republished all of the articles and many of the interviews, they have in the previous two decades generated little discussion in the English-speaking world. Apart from the biographies of Eribon, Miller and Macey elsewhere in the English-speaking world, where Foucault's writings on Iran had only been translated in fragments and the French responses to him at the time had not been translated at all, his Iran excursion and the writings stemming from it had been severely understated (cf. Afary & Anderson 2005:7–9). Fourthly, again for the first time, Foucault's Iran writings were challenged by a 'feminist' reading – yet not without shortcomings.

Afary and Anderson's book consists of two parts: the first part, 'Foucault's discourse on pinnacles and pitfalls' (Afary & Anderson 2005:13–68), provides an introduction to Foucault's thought, precisely those elements in his philosophy that would again manifest itself in his Iran writings, whilst the second part, 'Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution and after' (Afary & Anderson 2005:69–162), provides a thorough investigation into Foucault's preparation for his two Iran visits, the visits themselves as well as the immediate aftermath of the visits, employing several feminist purposes in their reading of the events (with the aforementioned Iranian feminist 'Atoussa H' and Marxist scholar Maxime Rodinson being their most prominent discursive informants; Afary & Anderson 2005:163–177), concluding with the translation and annotation of all of Foucault's Iran writings, as well as the translation of several of his critics' reactions to those writings (Afary & Anderson 2005:180–277).

Concurring that Foucault's philosophical approach to the Iran affair was vague, Afary and Anderson (2005:2–7) nevertheless noted the clarity of Foucault's relation to the Islamist movement in Iran, with reference to three distinct 'passions': an opposition to the imperialist and colonialist policies of the West; a rejection

of certain cultural and social aspects of modernity that had transformed social hierarchies in both the East and the West; and the notion of political spirituality – that Foucault documented the Iranian public's fascination with the seemingly archaic rituals of Shia Islam and that he was 'intrigued', if not 'infatuated', by the active participation of clerics in the revolt and the 'use of religious processions and rituals for ostensibly political concerns' (Afary & Anderson 2005:39, 84).

Against the backdrop of their note on these 'passions', the authors would likely concur that Foucault's support for the revolting masses should be understood as modern-critical in orientation – and that Foucault was indeed intrigued by the nature of their political spirituality, which he was convinced was sustaining an alternative absolutely other to liberal democracy. However, the two authors went further – indeed too far – arguing that Foucault's view of the revolution is integrally related to 'a one-sided hostility to modernity', that his Iran writings in its 'modern-critical one-sidedness' actually raise questions about 'his overall approach to modernity' (Afary & Anderson 2005:5).

The question is as follows: are Afary and Anderson (cf. 2005:163–193, 293, fn. 1) in these remarks about the 'modern-critical one-sidedness' of Foucault's Iran writings not implicitly adhering to Esposito's (2003:26–70; cf. 2005:350) description of four 'popular myths' in Western responses to the revolution, namely, that the revolution was narrowly, exclusively religious; that it was, before and after, confused and disorganised; that it followed a predictable, naively religious course; and that there was no such thing as 'Iranian moderates'? It seems to be the case. Is this the reason why the authors could throughout their book not give Foucault sufficient credit for the originality of his contra-modern, contra-Western perspectives on the revolution? Foucault certainly did not conform to these Western myths and mythmaking about the revolution at the time.

In an illuminating article, British philosopher Jonathan Rée (2005:46) threw the gauntlet at Afary and Anderson, precisely

for ‘going too far’, accusing them of skewing Foucault, stating about their book that ‘one could hardly have asked for more – one might have asked for less, however’. Rée’s overall hostile reception of the book is however not justified. Afary and Anderson’s tone was temperate in general and their judgements – although questionable in some cases in the sense that they indeed took their reception of Foucault to too many debatable heights – were on most points non-partisan. Rée’s critique of Afary and Anderson’s work was necessary though, because it brought balance into the reception, from a loyalist viewpoint in particular (Rée 2005):

Afary and Anderson’s summaries of Foucault’s achievements are consistently hostile and tendentious. Noting that he was sceptical about self-congratulatory Western narratives of progress and modernisation, they make the absurd assertion that ‘Foucault privileged premodern social relations over modern ones’ [...] Having constructed an imaginary Foucault intoxicated by ‘authenticity’, ‘creativity’ and ‘living dangerously’ – notions that have no place in his work except as butts of his teasing paradoxes – Afary and Anderson offer their readers the astonishing assurance that ‘Foucault’s concept of authenticity meant looking at situations where people lived dangerously and flirted with death, the site where creativity originated’. And having transformed this gentle apostle of radiant uncertainty into a philosophical version of Charles Manson, they credit him with an ‘uncritical enthusiasm for the Islamist movement of Iran’ [...] Foucault’s quizzical mixture of excitement and disappointment over Iran, together with his perceptive remarks about corruption as a political issue and the recrudescence of political spirituality in the Muslim world, are passed over in silence as Afary and Anderson condemn him for an ‘uncritical embrace’ of Islamism and try to explain it in terms of a kinky fascination with ‘limit experiences’, ‘new forms of creativity’ and even (yes, they are serious) the ‘transgressive powers’ of Ayatollah Khomeini. Although they have spent ten years working on their book, it has not been a labour of love. (p. 46)

It is true that Afary and Anderson went in some respects too far (of course, there will always be those who suppose that even Afary and Anderson ‘did not go far enough’ [cf. Aysha 2006:377–379]; point not taken). Yet, in difference with Rée, it may be responsibly contended that Foucault’s preoccupation with death,

marginality and transgression was indeed characteristic of his general philosophical disposition, as Miller (1993:83, 87-88) convincingly argued and Afary and Anderson<sup>52</sup> simply emphasised, in confirmation of the suggestion in the previous chapters that Foucault was convinced that he was witnessing in the streets of Tehran those kinds of irrationalities that, for him, would break new boundaries in the understanding of subjectivity. Afary and Anderson's criticism of Foucault could indeed have been more toned down, even before the publication of their book (Afary & Anderson 2004):

We suggest that Foucault's Iran writings reveal, albeit in exaggerated form, some problems in his overall perspective, especially its one-sided critique of modernity. In this sense, the Iran writings contribute something important to our understanding of this major social philosopher [...] We think of Foucault as this very cool, unsentimental thinker who would be immune to the revolutionary romanticism that has overtaken intellectuals who covered up Stalin's atrocities or Mao's [...] but in this case, he abandoned much of his critical perspective in his intoxication with what he saw in Iran. Here was a great philosopher of difference who looked around him in Iran and everywhere saw unanimity. (p. 3)

Foucault's notorious suspicion of utopianism, his antagonism towards grand narratives and universals and his stress on difference, particularity and singularity rather than totality, would make him less prone, one could reasonably assume, to romanticise any authoritarian politics that promised to refashion 'from above' the lives and thought of a people, for their own benefit. However, Afary and Anderson were convinced that Foucault's Iran writings had indicated that he was not immune to the type of illusions that so many Western leftists had held with regard to the Soviet Union and China – although he documented its 'birth' in Iran, he himself, according to these two authors' reading of Foucault, did not anticipate the birth of yet another modern state where old (religious) technologies of domination could be refashioned and re-institutionalised, and he did not realise how explosive the

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52. For instance, Afary and Anderson (2005:23-24, 34, 39, 50, 201, 259).



combination of a traditionalist ideology and modern technologies of organisation, surveillance, warfare and propaganda would be in the end.

Afary and Anderson (2005:36,124) went so far as to speculate that Foucault's 'peculiar Orientalism' would have to carry some of the blame in this regard, in the sense that Foucault 'privileged an idealised, premodern past – the period of early Islam – over modernity' – his 'denial of any social or political differentiation among the Iranian "people"' bearing witness to this 'breathtaking' error. Afary and Anderson (2005) therefore constructed a picture of Foucault as not just an anti-modernist, but as a 'defender of traditional societies': that, in all his major works, in terms of their reception, Foucault described the visible improvements of modernising reform as less appealing than what they displaced. That is incorrect: Foucault's penetrating critique of modernity never and in any way implied that he would uncritically 'privilege premodern societies' in his historiographical discourse.

Again, Foucault is taken to seduced-bohemian and Orientalist extremes where he would never have expected to be. Foucault was, of course, willing to *reorient* premodern notions: in the specific context of contra-modernity, Foucault in this reorientation indeed argued for the *revival* of political spirituality. In other words, 'Foucault does not go back, he brings back' (Beukes 2009b:120). He was convinced that some resources of past and present cultures could be utilised strategically and selectively to invigorate the consumed resources of modernity (cf. Foucault 1991a:82). It must be nevertheless be pointed out that Afary and Anderson were correct in their interpretation that Foucault was 'fascinated' by the revolution, not just because it was a challenge to repression or American imperialism, but because it was indeed an attempt to open a spiritual dimension in politics, with all the risks involved therein.

Afary and Anderson's volume on certain points bears testimony to the validity of another suggestion in Chapter 7 (see 'Foucault and "Atoussa H"' in ch. 7), that Foucault compromised his

philosophical position by not engaging the legitimate critique of those subjects who were systematically beleaguered as the revolution unfolded, especially so, for Afary and Anderson, women. Employing 'Atoussa H' as their silent and guiding informant (Afary & Anderson 2005:91–94, 142, 181, 209–210), the authors argued just how far Foucault was, in their minds, removed from understanding what the revolt would hold for what they call the 'natural dissidents' of the revolution, namely, women, 'homosexuals' and secularists in general.

Yet again they go further and too far, postulating that Foucault had a 'highly problematic relationship' with feminism, which to them is a fundamental problem in his philosophy. Foucault, according to them, never questioned the 'separate, but equal' message of the revolutionaries. He explicitly dismissed feminist warnings that the revolution was headed in a dangerous direction. He seemed to regard such warnings as nothing more than Orientalist attacks on Islam, thereby accentuating his own 'peculiar Orientalism, compromising a balanced perspective on the revolution' (Afary & Anderson 2005:5, 36). More generally, in their view, Foucault remained insensitive towards the many ways in which state power affected women, ignoring the fact that those most wounded by (premodern) disciplinary practices were often women and children, who were oppressed in the name of tradition, obligation or 'honour'. Afary and Anderson seem to never take into account that Foucault never aspired to articulate finally and precisely the dispositions of Otherness, be it women's rights or gay liberation.

Using the discussed (see 'Foucault and "Atoussa H"' in ch. 7) letter of 'Atoussa H' in her response to Foucault's support for the revolution as their compass, Afary and Anderson (2005:26–27, 93, 109, 132) argue that although there is very little in Foucault's writings on women or women's rights,<sup>53</sup> his 'ambiguous and often dismissive attitude toward feminism' notwithstanding, his

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53. But why should there be, since he was a man? Or is this a feminist kind of 'seduction'?

theoretical writings on power as ‘everywhere’ had an immense influence on a whole generation of feminist academics, inspiring them via his technologies of the Self not to view women as ‘powerless and innocent victims of patriarchal social structures’ (Afary & Anderson 2005:27).<sup>54</sup>

Again, it is true that Foucault himself never addressed feminist concerns or gay liberation in general, and yet again he is accused here of ‘revealing a clinical detachment’ that for the two authors was grounded in a ‘covert androcentricity’ – the predicament of women and ‘homosexuals’ is something he glossed over, not only in Iran, ‘but in his work in general’ (Afary & Anderson 2005:27–28).<sup>55</sup> This seems to be the reason the two authors focus on what they consider to be Foucault’s ‘quick willingness’ to accept assurances of the revolutionaries regarding the ‘separate, but equal’ status of these subjects in a new dispensation. In all of his Iran writings, Foucault indeed only once referred to the dilemma of women, and then only after Khomeini’s bloodbath had started to manifest itself in March 1979 (Foucault 1979b:265), but in ‘an offhand, almost grudging acknowledgement’ (Afary & Anderson 2005:132),<sup>56</sup> even then seemingly offended and even slightly amazed that his opinion or lack of one caused women to take offence.

The two authors conclude that Foucault’s ‘unwillingness’ to engage the plight and legitimate critique of women and ‘homosexuals’ (as well as secularists) who were subjugated as the revolution unfolded, is an ‘inherent problem’ in his work, and not restricted to his Iran writings. That is why the two authors consider it to be of logical consequence that Foucault had been

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54. Is that not the point precisely? If Foucault’s philosophy had such an impact on feminism, why is he put on the clock to have done more or otherwise for ‘women’s rights’, inside or outside of Iran?

55. This is yet another unfortunate example of a careless statement in a work that otherwise offered much in terms of the translations of Foucault’s Iran writings in English.

56. Again, is this type of pejorative lashing really necessary in responsible philosophical discourse?

unable or unwilling to penetrate the repressive dynamics of the religious fundamentalism underlying the revolutionary movement: the consequences on the real, lived lives of the oppressed left him cold (cf. Afary & Anderson 2005:39).

However, Afary and Anderson's analysis, on the less confrontational end, confirms the notion that Foucault appreciated the masses' resistance to established power with regard to the dissemination of information and the way it assisted the momentum of the revolution. They indeed isolated it as one of Foucault's 'astute observations' about the revolution: that this seemingly anti-modern movement was heavily dependent on modern means of communication to disseminate its ideas; that, in this regard, a blending of tradition and modernity, of modern means of communication with centuries-old religious convictions and rituals, made it possible to paralyse the modern authoritarian police state of the Shah (Afary & Anderson 2005:98). Unfortunately, this sort of acknowledgement is far too scarce and scattered in an overly polemical work.

The two authors left no doubt that, in their minds, Foucault's Iran expedition and the writings that bore witness to that expedition estranged him from the intellectual community in which he was a central and leading figure during the 1970s, and that the incident harmed his reputation irrevocably.<sup>57</sup> Foucault was indeed estranged from former theoretical allies, colleagues, feminists and co-activists, such as Kate Millet, who wrote a 330-page memoir on the affair of Foucault, women and Iran, Claudine Mollard, Laya Dunayevskaya, Simone de Beauvoir, Claire Brière, Pierre Blanchet, Jean Lacouture, Bernard Ullmann, Pierre Manent and, of course, the Broyelles.

It is thus on the issue of Foucault's support for the revolution, initially, and the support for Khomeini, eventually - which was described elsewhere (Beukes 2009b:124) as 'ironising', as

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57. Afary and Anderson (2005:121, 111-127; see Afary & Anderson 2005:247-250, again for the Broyelles' attack). This evaluation is correct, as the reaction from some of these eminent figures illustrates.

Foucault ‘not being mesmerised’, because the horizontal organisation of Shia clergy in his mind would not have allowed the sanctification of one single ‘super *mullah*’ (although conceding that Foucault was in general uncritical of Khomeini and overburdened his critique of modernity in the process) – that there is agreement between my reception of Foucault’s involvement in Iran and that of Afary and Anderson’s.

But otherwise we differ rather pertinently. Afary and Anderson made it abundantly clear that there is no distinction to be made between Foucault’s support for the revolting masses and his support for Khomeini, however implicit the support for the latter might have been. For Afary and Anderson (2005:14, 36–37), Khomeini became for Foucault the personification of Nietzsche’s will to power, a ruthless historical figure with ‘saintly self-mastery’, the perfect example of going beyond Nietzsche’s ‘ascetic priest’. This part of their reception is clearly eisegetical, as the primary texts themselves do not at all give the impression that Foucault held this kind of Nietzschean perspective on Khomeini: as the only brief and unfruitful meeting between Foucault and Khomeini indicated (Eribon 1991:286), there is nothing ‘Nietzschean’ to be read in Foucault’s perspective on Khomeini, neither as a person nor as the ‘leader of the revolt’. Again, Foucault’s views on Khomeini, however uncritical, and his support for the revolution should be kept apart as far as possible.

Afary and Anderson (2005:105) finally concluded that Foucault, with his comments and writings on Iran, had isolated ‘a unique and very problematic position for himself’ – and it is clear that they want to hold Foucault responsible for that position. Foucault, in their opinion, has a lot to answer for. Although they accepted Foucault’s observations as penetrating and unique from a modern-critical perspective and concurred restrainedly with his notion of political spirituality – which indicated that the movement against the Shah included many diverse elements, not only social or political in orientation, but ‘spiritual’ and religious as well, even dominantly so – they maintained that Foucault had been annexed by the persona of Khomeini to such an extent that

it blinded him, that he had found Khomeini's ability to maintain the anti-Shah focus overly intriguing, to the point of uncritical adoration.

Afary and Anderson acknowledged Foucault's insight into the dissemination of knowledge in Iran, that he anticipated the revolution to have a global reach through its use of modern means of communication. They also acknowledged to some extent that Foucault's philosophical position was modern-critical, that he rejoiced in the revolution because he interpreted it as a rejection of the spirit of Enlightenment, a European form of modernity; that he hoped that the 'madness of the revolt' would break new boundaries for understanding subjectivity, transgressing the fixed cultural and political positions of rational modernity. Yet, this focus had led him, as far as these two authors were concerned, to an apathetic attitude regarding the way Islamic radicalism displaced liberal ideas on the state and the individual.

Several scholars<sup>58</sup> were left uncomfortable by the pedantic and accusatory tone of this first extensive introduction to Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution. Aspects of it can nevertheless be endorsed and the contributions the book made at the time should be acknowledged, with specific reference to the first translations of Foucault's Iran writings in English offered in the volume. But the point that Foucault was somehow 'seduced' – one which the two authors constantly drove home – is just too pejorative to give this work a sense of balance and fairness (Leezenberg 2018):

Whilst the Afary and Anderson volume was certainly valuable as a compilation of Foucault's Iranian writings, their interpretive essay that introduced the volume contained serious misunderstandings of Foucault, Iran, and Foucault's writings. Initially, many readers and

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58. For recent critical reviews, see Gray and Faisal (2018:100) and McCall (2018:47). Already in the first reviews of the book the inadequacies in Afary and Anderson's introductory chapter were noted (cf. Bernauer 2006:784-785; Lynch 2007:169-176). For a more favourable and indeed balanced review of the work, see Elahi (2007:157-162).

scholars of Foucault's writings reacted to these texts on events in Iran with puzzlement, if not outright embarrassment [...] (they) make serious errors both in their rendering of Foucault's views and in their account of the Iranian revolution [...] (they) fall back on a number of modernist and secularist concepts and assumptions that are explicitly called into question by Foucault. These concern, first and foremost, the concept of revolution. (pp. 8–9)

Although Afary and Anderson's work can be regarded as an example of the initial and rather confused phase of the scholarly reception of Foucault's Iran writings,<sup>59</sup> Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:75–112) recently argued extensively against Afary and Anderson's reception, indicating that the two authors overstated the leftism of the Iranian revolution and that by the time of Foucault's arrival and involvement in Iran, the Iranian left had basically stopped to be a charioteer of revolt in Iran. His critique of Afary and Anderson's work is penetrating to the extent that it renders it, save their translations of Foucault's Iran writings, which will always be the most valuable and authentic contribution of the volume, somewhat outdated, just more than a decade after its publication. Yet again in all fairness, it should be noted that the work had a significant impact on the scholarly scene in the years immediately after its publication in 2005: few commentaries since ignored the valid contributions made by this first extensive introduction to Foucault's involvement in Iran. The same evidently applies to this discussion: Afary and Anderson's work, with its limitations, still deserves a thorough consideration from Foucault's readers. There must a good reason

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59. The author's initial work (Beukes 2009a, 2009b) must unfortunately be placed in this rather bedazzled category as well: besides Leezenberg, who was from the outset (1998, republished 2004) very clear about his reading of Foucault's involvement in Iran in terms of a strict adherence to Foucault's own theoretical framework, holding himself close to that premise still today (cf. Leezenberg 2018:4–28), few scholars at the time really understood what to make of Foucault's expeditions to Iran. Today the picture seems clearer: Foucault did not make a 'mistake' in Iran or in the months immediately after his two visits to the country, as long as his Iran writings are interpreted from within his theoretical framework, as Leezenberg insisted from the beginning. Foucault certainly could have been more obvious on a number of points, but the fact that his reputation was damaged must be ascribed to misplaced interpretations of Foucault, as Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:75–112) insists, rather than as a consequence of some 'seduced' or 'peculiar Orientalist' failure on his side.

why Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:73–103) considered it necessary to dedicate more than 30 pages in his erudite work specifically addressing Afary and Anderson’s reception of Foucault, critical as he too was of it.

A more balanced, yet still curious, accusation of Foucault as being ‘seduced’ is offered in a condensed intellectual landscaping of early 21st-century political activity in Iran, shortly published after the Afary and Anderson volume, namely, Danny Postel’s (2006:59–71) *Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran*, especially the section ‘The necropolitical imagination: Foucault’s Iranian odyssey reconsidered’. This contribution covered four overlapping themes: the confusion in the Western liberal tradition about Iran, which the author (Postel 2006:1) considers to be ‘widespread’; the reasons why dissident intellectuals in Iran today are nevertheless liberalist, rather than reactionary or Marxist; the tremendous energy of the political and intellectual scene in contemporary Iran and how Foucault’s complex engagement with the Iranian revolution, as well as the hostile reaction towards it, both somehow encapsulate the confusion and the energy of the liberal project as manifested in 21st-century Iran.

Postel (2006:4–58) argued that, for the Western left, the modern-critical acknowledgement of failures in the damaging modern project of colonialisation of the East and the recognition of the misleading perspectives of modern Western Orientalism generated an often-uncritical adoration of aspects of the non-Western Other in the Western world. For the non-Western world, on the other hand, the modern-critical enterprise implied the rejection of all which bore the signature of *their* oppressive Other, which led to a search for some pre-colonial truth, untainted by Western influence. In the ideological confusion that followed, religious fundamentalism seized the opportunity to set up itself as an authentic reaction to both the modern-critical claims of the Western liberal tradition and the seemingly resonating premodern reactions of its Orient counterpart. Against this backdrop, religious fundamentalism produced a political discourse that, today more than ever, thrives on the coarse principle that ideas



have merely singular geographical sources that dictate the status of their authenticity and relevance. In countries such as Iran, anti-imperialist arguments have therefore been appropriated by theocratical structures, and religious faith has been cunningly manipulated as a means to delegitimise any and every form of dissent.

Postel (2006:31–57) claimed that observing liberalism through an Iranian spectre reveals the failure of the Western liberal tradition to emerge from a remarkable narrow-mindedness that prevents it from accepting the reality that the Other can engage with and have internal connections with ideas, that may be highlighted by similarity rather than difference. Close to the proximity of Almond's (2007) central argument which is presented *infra*, he elaborated on how the same limitations that bound the old modern Orientalists in the 21st century have created a new breed of Western liberal, which is not all that different from and not less damaging and dangerous than its outspoken modern-Orientalist predecessor. Now focusing solemnly on difference, these new 'Orientalists' are virtually indoctrinated to expect only difference from the Other, whilst completely disregarding similarity. Fighting the injustices against the Other in this sense has become as problematic as the modern fetishisation of the Other.

The work (cf. Postel 2006:11–13) utilised Iran's early 21st-century intellectual environment to illustrate how the late 20th-century liberal movements in Iran, led by dissident intellectuals such as Akbar Ganji and Ramin Jahanbegloo, had begun the laborious political project of re-reading and re-implementing the thought of some of the most prominent Western intellectuals of the past decades, notably Habermas, Foucault, Rorty and Taylor, to engage the theme of 'modernity in Iran' – the *tajadod*, in Persian – which loomed large in public life and was far from being a mere theoretical issue: [i]n the Iranian context, liberalism is a matter of life and death [...] a fighting faith' (Postel 2006:37). For these Iranian intellectuals, their lives literally depended on what they could distil from the liberal Western tradition. Yet, the liberal

tradition failed them, as is intensely and repeatedly accentuated (Postel 2006:44-57), because of the liberals' modern-critical fixation on difference rather than similarity, because of their unwillingness to respect the actual and frequent similarities to the Other.

The dialogue between civilisations is therefore not construed as a reductionist exchange of two alienated Others, defined solely by their differences. Instead, it appears as an interchange in which landscapes and localities undergo symbolic metamorphoses, and that experiences once localised in a given place increasingly find echoes or resonance chambers amongst distant societies and peoples. The modern-critical gaze on difference, combined with opposition to the neo-conservative agenda in the United States, has in this way silenced the liberal tradition in Iran (Postel 2006:57).

Somewhat indebted to the basic tenets of Afary and Anderson's analyses and their basic conclusions, Postel (2006:59-64) nevertheless affirms the importance of the notion of a political spirituality in Foucault's perspectives on the revolution, precisely because it places the reluctance of the Western left to get involved with Iran in the context of modern-critical thought. Postel's reading of Foucault's Iran writings is otherwise thematically interwoven with Afary and Anderson's perspectives: he concurs, for example (Postel 2006:64-71), that Foucault's stance on the Iranian revolution was marked by a rejection of the scepticism that was characterised by Foucault's cynical perspectives on Western institutions of power and that Foucault in Iran seemed to treat power in Iran 'differently'.

On the one hand, Postel (2006) agrees with Afary and Anderson that Foucault adopted and embraced the singular kind of theocracy he was witnessing in Iran because of its sheer 'difference' rather than its ability to govern equitably and respect human rights. He also agreed by implication with the 'Orientalist objection' to Foucault, namely, that Foucault's Iran writings present how philosophical estimations of the Other have evolved

out of what is judged by Westerners to be ‘most authentic’ about the Other – in this case, as in most other cases, the most exotic and most different aspects of Islam.

On the other hand, Postel (2006) stood on the brink of a breakthrough in his reading of Foucault and yet he did not claim it. If it is true, as he argued, that the liberal tradition failed Iran in its unwillingness to compromise its own gaze of differentiation, to cross over into the strained domain of the Other as an ‘Other Self’ – in other words, if the liberal tradition failed Iran because of its unwillingness to interrupt the safe theoretical haven of the modern-critical respect for the Other’s Otherness, whilst the Other’s Sameness was being sacrificed in the process – Foucault, actually, is precisely that kind of liberal intellectual Postel was looking for.

Whilst Postel (2006:71) recognised and even appreciated Foucault’s ironical quirks, that Foucault should be read cautiously in terms of his vagueness, his understatement, the strained quality of his efforts, ‘however quietly, to come to grips with [...] Iran’, he, in a cruel rebound of irony himself did not recognise that Foucault was exactly the ‘different kind of liberal’ he sought for – one who indeed always preferred to be quiet, if not silent; one who was willing to admit Sameness in the Self-posed Other; who not only saw difference but likeness; who was consciously willing to cross over into the strained domain of the Other by severely compromising his acute sense of Self, or his ‘West-essentialisation’, as some of Foucault’s harsher critics called it; one who was willing to interrupt the predictable yet unproductive reception of the Iranian revolution in the minds of Western (liberal) observers. What initially brought Postel to isolate Foucault’s ‘necropolitical imagination’ in his Iranian ‘Odyssey’ as of fundamental importance in his reconsideration of the relationship of Self with Other, and the liberal tradition’s role in keeping both the tensions and similarities in this regard alive, is an avenue in the end not explored. Instead of using Foucault merely as a token for postmodernity’s fixation on difference, Foucault could have been

read as the one thinker who broke that one-sided gaze and disturbed that fixation. Postel (2006) did the exegesis, but he himself did not follow Foucault into that strained domain between Self and Other.

Whilst Afary and Anderson often went too far in their analyses, Postel did not go far enough. He missed out on Foucault's sense of Self-interruption, neglecting the opportunity to rather view Foucault as a 'self-conscious Greek in Persia'. Postel, in conclusion, noted a worthwhile to ponder irony. Foucault's ideas had, since his death, been deployed by liberals in Iran to unmask the clerical system and its operations of power: that is, as a tool of analysis against the same revolutionary forces about which Foucault had galvanised in their inception. 'To his credit, I think this irony would have pleased Foucault a great deal had he lived to witness it' (Postel 2006:64–71). That is certainly true.

## ■ 'Orientalist?'

In 2017, an outstanding contribution to the interpretation of Foucault's relation with precisely the 'Orient Other' was made by Lazreg (2017), in *Foucault's Orient: The Conundrum of Cultural Sufferance, from Tunisia to Japan*, that for the first time dealt with this issue specifically in Foucault scholarship – and it did so with remarkable efficacy. Lazreg<sup>60</sup> scrutinises the function of the 'Orient' and generally non-Western cultures in Foucault's writings during and before the Iran episode. She endeavours to illuminate the perplexing cavity between Foucault's commanding and elucidating reflections on the Western condition on the one hand, and his understanding of the 'Orient' as a perplexity beyond the clutch of Western rationality on the other hand.

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60. See Lazreg (2017:1–7) for a broader introduction; for the 'Orientalist' issue at hand, see in particular 'Foucault's anthropology of the Iranian revolution' (pp. 122–158).

Lazreg (2017:1–2) notes that, throughout his life, Foucault maintained a profound interest in non-Western countries. He lived in Tunisia from 1966 to 1968 and once even contemplated moving to Japan, as mentioned earlier, a country he visited twice, on a short visit in 1970 and then during the reflective tour of early 1978. He voiced the responsibility he felt to survey ideas constructed particularly among the minorities or people who historically have been bereft of the ability to speak or make themselves heard. Yet, in spite of this commitment and numerous travels, Foucault *did* fashion a concept of Western rationality in contradistinction to the Orient, as explained in the first and original 1961 preface to *History of Madness*, in which he wrote that ‘the Orient is for the Occident everything that it is not [...] it constitutes the limit of Western rationality’ (Foucault 1961:xxx).<sup>61</sup>

Lazreg (2017:1–2) argues that, at first glance, Foucault’s observation of an insuperable rift between East and West is inexplicable, as it seems to be completely unaligned with his political perspectives. He had after all been a member of the

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61. Lazreg indicates that the preface was removed from the 1964 French abridged edition: ‘for decades, all foreign language translations (except for the Italian) were based on this abridged edition, and therefore did not contain the 1961 preface with the passage on the Orient. The revised 1972 edition, under the abridged title, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique (History of Madness)*, contained a new and very brief preface again without the passage on the ‘Orient–Occident divide. It was not until 2006 that a translation of the 1972 version reproduced the 1961 preface in its entirety in the English language’ (Lazreg 2017:1,10, fn. 3); [...] ‘The removal of the preface does not mean that Foucault had had second thoughts about the exclusion of the Orient from the Western *ratio*. On the contrary, the preface to *The Order of Things* published 5 years later introduced the book with a citation from Borges about a fictitious Chinese encyclopaedia. Discussing the encyclopaedia as if it were real, Foucault analysed a bizarre Chinese enumeration of dogs as reflecting the peculiarities of Chinese culture and language as opposed to the scientific orderliness of Western culture. Foucault’s foregrounding of the discussion of the Chinese encyclopaedia in the book transcends his penchant for provocative literary examples; it is also hardly attributable to what Georges Canguilhem called Foucault’s *espagnolisme* or predilection for things Spanish. Indeed, the fiction in which *The Order of Things* found its inspiration is different from the works of literature such as those of Flaubert, or Robbe-Grillet, that he was prone to cite. Furthermore, the epistemic significance of the Chinese encyclopaedia has not been fully explored, although several analysts have cited it but ignored its role in Foucault’s conception of the Orient’. Lazreg’s first contribution to contemporary Foucault scholarship is that she does not ignore this role.

French Communist Party (even if only for two years). He had taken stations typically linked with the Western left on an assortment of topics, such as the rights of immigrants, prisoners in Tunisia as well as in France, psychiatric patients and Polish insurgents against Soviet rule. Yet in reconsideration, a number of dynamics implicitly indicate precisely the *compatibility* of Foucault's deep-rooted standpoint on cultural Otherness with his general philosophical configuration. For instance, as a 'specific intellectual' or a 'philosopher of particularity', he attentively handpicked amongst the (many) questions of his time, rather than 'availing himself of a universal principle of justice, freedom, or democracy to guide his stance' (Lazreg 2017:2).<sup>62</sup> That is why, whether in Tunisia, Iran or Japan, Foucault never passed an opportunity to refer to Marx and Marxism in general in very hostile terms. In Tunisia, he was surprised by the gravity with which students, campaigning against Bourguiba's repression, took Marx's ideas – which Foucault considered totally obsolete – to the point of endangering their lives for those Marxist ideals. On the other hand, Foucault also shelved their understanding of Marx as in itself antiquated (cf. Lazreg 2017:2).

However, in Iran, Foucault was convinced that he had located a clear repudiation of Marx's conception of religion, which treated religion as pure escapism and an evasion of the socio-philosophical issues at hand. Strangely yet again, when confronted in Japan with the president of the Socialist Party, who was certainly not taking up any opportunities to

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62. 'In explaining Foucault's understanding of his role as an intellectual, Bourdieu pointed out that Foucault wished to avoid being "the moral and political conscience," or "the spokesman" and "entitled advocate," a stance seen as typical of "the universal intellectual," as Sartre was' (Lazreg 2017:2). More specifically, Foucault was critical of the French left, and defensibly so, ascribing its deficiencies to Marxism: '[...] informed by the Communist Party's initial support for Stalinism, Foucault's interpretation of Marx typically rested on an economic-deterministic viewpoint. And Foucault was opposed to socialism in Europe, as well as in the Third World societies, such as Vietnam, that had founded socialist governments in the aftershock of conflicts of decolonization' (Lazreg 2017:2).

collaborate with French socialists, Foucault drew on the universalistic tone of Marx's general philosophical attitude to put pressure on the president to alter his position.<sup>63</sup> A particular result of this resistance to Marx as well as of Foucault's apparently arbitrary links to the French left, and more general European Left, was his inhibition towards the thought of the *Nouveaux Philosophes* (Paras 2006:57-97), *inter alia* that of André Glucksmann, as well as his apparent indebtedness to Neoliberalism during the last years of his life, both in Europe and the United States.<sup>64</sup>

Foucault was never alone in his general denunciation of Marx and Marxism, or unaccompanied in his later interest in Neoliberalism and his offhand flirtations with the left, when measured from within his theoretical framework. It is precisely when Foucault's 'inconsistencies' and 'oddities' are interpreted from his own theoretical context – and not a Marxian framework, for instance<sup>65</sup> – that his work actually '[...] give(s) a surplus meaning to his conception of the Orient' (Lazreg 2017:3). Of course, this is precisely against the insistence that the acceptance of historical materialism is a prerequisite to consider cultural difference. It could be reasonably stated that resistance to Marx and Marxism was only one side of Foucault's broader antagonism

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63. The importance of Foucault's tenacious resistance to Marx's philosophical positioning is often concealed by 'his ties to the Gauche Prolétarienne, a Maoist organization founded in 1969, which organized factory workers, considered France an occupied territory, and called for a general people's uprising. Its charismatic leader, Pierre Victor, whose real name was Benny Lévy, ultimately renounced his politics and turned to Orthodox Judaism instead. Victor and Foucault held a long discussion on popular justice, published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1972' (Lazreg 2017:3). Daniel Defert explained to Lazreg (2017:3) '[...] that he had been a militant of the Gauche Prolétarienne, as well as the initiator of the establishment of the Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons (GIP), to which he had asked Foucault to lend his name because of his notoriety' (Lazreg 2017:3).

64. See Leezenberg's (2018:4–29) critical evaluation of the relation between revolt, religion and Neoliberalism in Foucault's later thought.

65. As Afary and Anderson (2005) did, when they interpreted Foucault's understanding of 'revolt' and 'revolution' not from Foucault's own theoretical framework, but a modernist one (Leezenberg 2018:4–7; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:75–112).

towards a humanist philosophy, in which Kant's 'cosmopolitan anthropology played an essential role' (cf. Lazreg 2017:3).

Lazreg (2017:3) persuasively contends that there is no doubt that Foucault's more general critique of humanist philosophy and the social sciences it informs is valuable for the issue at hand, namely, how to come to terms with Foucault's 'Orientalism'. It is true that humanist philosophy commonly combined the 'Western experience' with the 'human experience'; it also employed the 'Western experience' as a norm against which to estimate non-Western cultures. Foucault's antagonism to humanism's universalist assertions does however not unavoidably mean that he could not have used Western rationality as a sort of stocktaking in making sense of non-Western cultures. He simply decided not to use it.

On the other hand, it may be argued that Foucault's critique of humanism did not decentre his *own* view of humanist philosophy (Lazreg 2017:3). For experiencing other cultures necessarily brings the human being back to the forefront of understanding the subject itself – himself or herself as a subject of culture – in this case, the French subject Michel Foucault. It is against the milieu of Foucault's critique of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (very early in his career though) that Lazreg (2017:122–158) pursues the justification as well as the significances (and the penalties and costs, in terms of her reception) of Foucault's segregation of the Orient from Western rationality. Lazreg, in a provocative and enthralling way, disentangles the consequences of this segregation from Foucault's understanding of cultural difference, as well as his relation to non-Western cultures.<sup>66</sup>

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66. Lazreg's (2017:3–4) argument can adequately be summarised in her own words: '[...] Foucault's *Introduction* to Kant's *Anthropology* foreshadows the unresolvability of his cultural conundrum as initially expressed in *History of Madness*: although posited as the outer limit of the Western *ratio*, the Orient's reason remains unfathomable, and glimpsed only as "different" or "mysterious". Hence what this "outside reason" actually is, how it relates to the sundered interior of Western reason, is left till the end of (Foucault's) life unexplored, as if for fear it might reveal the operation of the very same reason Foucault analyzed so precisely from the inside.'



The ‘last woman standing question’ amongst Foucault scholars therefore is (and the delta of questions arising from it, of course): did Foucault succeed in postulating an alternative approach to an understanding and explaining of cultural difference – for example, Occident-Orient and West-East – in terms other than as an epistemological transgression (or, from his vocabulary, a ‘limit-experience’)? In other words, specifically with regards to Iran, is Foucault’s sense of Self-interruption properly distinguishable in his Iran writings and other writings from the period? Is Foucault discernible, as the author contends, as the silent one who indeed always preferred to be quiet, if not altogether silent; the one who was willing to admit Sameness in the Self-posed Other; the one who not only saw difference but likeness; who was consciously ready to cross over into the strained domain of the Other by severely compromising his acute sense of Self? Or, after Lazreg’s reading of Foucault, have we finally missed the opportunity to view Foucault as a ‘self-conscious Greek in Persia’? To answer the ‘last woman standing question’ and the many questions after that, it is crucial to provide ample room for two compelling arguments for and indication of Foucault being ‘uniquely Orientalist’ (encapsulated in the delta of questions above), namely, that of Lazreg’s and Ian Almond (2007; cf. 2004). Lazreg’s work is, next to Ghamari-Tabrizi’s (2016) *Foucault in Iran – Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, one of the most significant presentations from the Foucault scholarship over the past years. Whilst Tabrizi’s work will be presented in the next section, the core of Lazreg’s and Almond’s arguments, more or less in favour of the notion of a ‘uniquely Orientalist Foucault’, will be presented below.

Lazreg maintains<sup>67</sup> that the critical issue regarding ‘Foucault’s Orient’ is not ‘Self-interruption’, but that once Foucault characterised humanist anthropology as a deceptive

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67. The following paragraphs summarise Lazreg’s (2017:1-10, 122-158) reading, followed by an appraisal of Almond’s analysis.

effort to apprehend 'man', a beast he supposed have disappeared with the death of God, as proclaimed by Nietzsche, he himself could not have written about the Orient in the absence of anti-humanist anthropological assumptions. Incidentally, Foucault did fiddle at times with structuralist anthropology in his study of Western culture (but that was very early in his career of course, and he left even 'post-structuralism' behind in the mid-1960s altogether; Lazreg 2017:4; cf. Beukes 2002b:994-999; 2020b:vii-viii, xv-xvi). Thus, assuming the profile of 'the anthropologist' at the time, Foucault attempted to use the ethnological method for the history of ideas, in a delicate attempt to do for Western culture, what Claude Lévi-Strauss did for preliterate societies. Foucault's ethnological-archaeological premise initially aided him well in understanding the history of ideas in Western culture. However, the 'Orient' stayed an enigma in his thought, as this method he so ingeniously constructed did not apply and could clearly not be applied to living subjects and events in non-Western cultures. Foucault's ethnological-archaeological method, according to Lazreg's reading, in this sense proved to be a hindrance to an interpretation of the intersubjective character of cross-cultural engagement.

In the face of the methodological reality of the non-applicability of his method to non-Western structures, the question for Lazreg (2017:4) stands: did Foucault eventually foster a non-humanist or even anti-humanist anthropology? Is such a 'non-humanist anthropology' at all possible? To what degree did Foucault's view of the 'Orient' as well as his (indeed, rather limited) involvement in non-Western cultures, like that of Japan early in 1978 and Iran later that year, contrariwise disclose a kind of anthropology he had exactly proposed to move beyond? Stated in simpler terms, when physically in the Orient, how did Foucault come to grips with the human subject in that culturally 'Other' or 'different?' Again, to use Lazreg's own question, did Foucault's assessment of the 'Orient-Occident division' signify the limit(s) of his possibly

anti-humanist and undeniably nominalist understanding of cultural difference?<sup>68</sup>

If the epistemic role of experience as some sort of ‘epistemological constant’ is granted, this for Lazreg also points to the significance of the interviews Foucault gave about his stays in Tunisia, Iran and Japan, indeed as sources for an understanding of his views of cultural ‘Otherness’. From the many interviews she painstakingly disseminates, Lazreg eventually concludes that Foucault’s lifelong work was to expose the organisation and purposes of Western cultural (self)knowledge, as a way of revising how and why Western modernity in its multifarious appearances became what it still is, namely, a devastating cultural force.

Of course, it is true that Foucault never wrote a book or lectured on cultural Otherness or difference at the Collège de France. Sketching the journey of his views on the ‘Orient–Occident divide’ indeed requires placing him ‘in conversation with himself’, as it were, as well as with the people he met on his excursions to non-Western countries. To put him ‘in conversation with himself’ implies reading his texts in conjunction with dialogues he gave to the press, obviously his lectures, as well as his conferences. Foucault’s experience of non-Western cultures thus forms the empirical site within which his philosophical view of the Orient–Occident divide can be assessed in its temporal and spatial deployment. It provides the advantage of concretising the

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68. Lazreg (2017:4) accentuates that the ‘way in which Foucault expressed his experiences of non-Western cultures cannot be dismissed as mere travel impressions; they were indicative of the manner in which he thought of the Orient. From his perspective, any experience has thought content’: ‘He argued that thought “can and must be analyzed in all the manners of speaking, acting, behaving in which the individual appears and acts as a subject of knowledge, ethics or law, as a subject conscious of himself and others”’ (Lazreg 2017:5). The question however, and it is one that Lazreg does not answer, is whether that ‘experience-content’ is fixed or whether it is contingent. Were these ‘experience-contents’, real as they were for Foucault, not always revisable, subordinate to a diverse sets of contingents? It seems, as was the case with Afary and Anderson, that Foucault is read and interpreted here as ‘an author’, thus one ‘who speaks on behalf of Others’. As indicated from the very beginning of this book, ‘authorship’ is always a problematic notion in the Foucaultian context because of its inherent inconsistency.

meaning of the 'empirico-transcendental doublet' that he pre-positioned in his critique of the 'human sciences' in *The Order of Things*. In the world(s) of cultural Otherness in which Foucault threw himself, he was in a position to disengage that doublet by suspending the 'transcendental' (by which he unsurprisingly meant the assumption of a 'universal human nature') and experimenting with a new way of making sense of cultural diversity.

Lazreg's work pursues this question, whether Foucault allowed his exposure to non-Western societies to transform his thought as well as methodological practice. She is convinced that what Foucault overlooked is the effect of his view of the Orient, not only on the other side of Western rationality (which he left unexamined), but also on himself. Lazreg thus answers in the negative: neither Foucault's thought nor his methodology was particularly affected by his experience of non-Western domains, specifically the 'Orient'.

There are obvious variations in tenor and *Stimmung* in Foucault's noted experiences of non-Western cultures. Although varied, the three countries (Tunisia, Japan and Iran) that Lazreg analyses in terms of Foucault's 'Orient' have in common a sort of moral geographical location in the 'Western map of the East' ('Near' [or 'Middle'] and 'Far'). The three countries also have in common social topographies conventionally taken to be categorically 'non-Western'. In Tunisia, for example, Foucault mapped ancient Greece onto the 'local cultural present'; yet living in the historical heterotopia of the village of Sidi Bou Saïd, he missed that particular part of Tunisian culture that is veiled behind its French façade. Tunisian culture, according to Lazreg's reading, thus formed a 'blank' in Foucault's imagination.

In Iran, on the other hand, Foucault felt more liberated to discover the resident culture by probing into the importance of Shia Islam to elucidate the conflict and the risks the anti-Shah protesters were more than willing to take. In Japan again, Foucault experienced the profound 'limit' of the 'Orient-Occident divide'.

However, unlike by far the majority of Western philosophers before him, or sociologists and political theorists who endeavoured (more often than not without any sense of accomplishment) to reinterpret and – in modern Western fashion, reschematise – Japanese thought and culture, Foucault remained steady in his own schematic view of the Orient. Yet in Japan, his experience of the culture itself obliged him to recognise that he should expand his interpretation of that culture. This apparent attempt to make ‘a history of this great divide’, which he implied in the original preface to *History of Madness*, was, according to Lazreg’s reading, never completed or fulfilled: hence, the ‘enigma’ of Japanese culture was left unknotted for Foucault.

Lazreg in no sense of the word reads Foucault as a victim of his own schematic divide of the West and the East, the Occident and the Orient and the Self and the Other. The problematic choices Foucault was up to in his efforts to comprehend the dissimilar cultures of Japan, Tunisia and Iran during his ‘Oriental expeditions’ mirror his unwillingness to transcend the epistemic divide he *himself* created between the West and the Orient. He consistently stressed cultural differences using Western culture, which he indeed considered to be uniform in modern guise, as a standard of reference, not realising how normalised his own ‘norm’ has become in the process. Of course, Lazreg is too delicate an exegete even to start to imply that Foucault was convinced of a presumed superiority of Western culture. Instead, for Lazreg, the West was for him a constant frame of reference and this repeated reference, when joined with what he himself indicated about non-Western cultures as ‘Other’, calls into question his often proclaimed antagonism to the universalist claims of humanist thought.

If in Japan Foucault expressed sheer estrangement, in Iran, where he thus travelled to only months after he had been in Japan, he vigorously attempted to bridge that divide between East and West, at least conceptually. In guarding his interpretation of the Iranian revolution against his critics, he defined it as a special case of past protest movements in Europe, including the French

revolution, all of which were moved by a political spirituality. However, his idealist conception of the dogmatical features of Shia Islam excluded considerations of social class (a fact Foucault indeed acknowledged after the fact), social inequality and material needs at the roots of the Iranian movement and its evolution. In this sense, according to Lazreg's overall reception, Foucault, in never being able to cross the great divide, was a somewhat unfortunate, rather displaced Orientalist – whatever he was hoping to achieve in Iran, was against the above backdrop that Lazreg so comprehensively illustrated, bound to fail. In the exposition in the last chapter of this book, Lazreg will be held close to the contents of this paragraph – because Foucault, indeed in 'radiant uncertainty', lost as only a 'Greek in Persia' can be, eventually crossed that divide.

Now, Almond's (2007) contribution to Foucault research on the Iran issue, in an exquisite chapter in his *The New Orientalists – Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*, stands in close discursive proximity to Lazreg's conclusion: Foucault was indeed a unique kind of Orientalist. Yet, Almond offered more than a clear yet aloof conclusion about Foucault being a 'unique Orientalist'.

To start with, Almond worked with different tools from those of Lazreg, with philosophical legacies rather than a strict exegesis of texts. Almond accordingly investigated the West's 'Orientalism', that curious yet seemingly spontaneous construction of an Arab or Islamic Other, as he detected in the works of some of the most profound thinkers of the 20th century: Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, Borges, Kristeva and others. Almond showed how the so-called 'postmodern' thinkers over the past decades had employed motifs and symbols of the Islamic Orient, its alterity and anachronisms, within their attempted critique and relocation of modernity (Almond 2007:2). However – and this is where Almond radically dissected the postmodern discourse – these thinkers presented to him a new and more insidious Orientalist strain – an argumentative notion which resonates with what Lazreg stipulates (by implication) as Foucault's 'unique Orientalism'. Almond's

(older) analysis, juxtaposed with the more recent reading of Lazreg, is important because it quite unintentionally sheds light on the distinguishing portrayal of Foucault in Iran in this book as ‘a self-conscious Greek in Persia’. Furthermore, it is of importance to this book’s perspective on the relationship between Foucault’s critique of modernity and Islam, which will be presented in the last chapter of this book as a Nietzschean ‘ethics of Self-discomfort’, that Almond explicitly embedded Foucault’s regarded ‘unique Orientalism’ in a Nietzschean context.

Crucial then is Almond’s reading of Nietzsche and the Orient. He indicated that although a wealth of studies exist on Nietzsche and the ‘high Orient’ (to use Edward Said’s famous distinction between the ‘high’ and ‘low’ Orient, the ‘high Orient’ indicating the established and well-published documentation of Nietzsche’s relation to themes in Buddhism, Hinduism, Japanese and Chinese philosophy), not a single monograph exists on the subject of Nietzsche and the ‘low Orient’ (Islamic cultures), although more than a hundred references to Hafiz, Arabs and Turks are to be found in the many volumes of Colli and Montinari’s *Nietzsche Studien* (Almond 2007:7–8), which has been for many decades the standardised scholarly collection of Nietzsche’s writings. Almond (2007:8) argued that for Nietzsche Islam is an ‘affirmative Semitic religion’ and forever hovering in the back of Nietzsche’s writings. And it was progressive: Nietzsche’s *Der Antichrist*, his last finished work, devoted more attention to ‘these enemies of the Crusades’ than any of his other works (Almond 2007:8).

According to Almond (2007:8), there are at least two reasons for Nietzsche’s ‘inordinate’ and generally sympathetic interest in Islam. Firstly, Islam provided for Nietzsche a criterion for establishing difference, a system of alternative customs and beliefs well equipped to undermine the universalist claims of both European Christianity and modernity, fulfilling the desire for the acquisition of a ‘trans-European eye’ which would relieve Europeans from their short-sightedness or *greisenhaften Kurzsichtigkeit* (Almond 2007:8); secondly, it departed from Nietzsche’s infamous *Selbsthass*, his contempt for German culture, his discomfort with the Self, the

limitedness of the Self and the own position, identity, perspective, inclination and so on (Almond 2007:9). This notion of self-interruption and self-critique, as we have already seen in the preceding chapters, played in terms of this book's reception a vital role in Foucault's 'radiation of uncertainty' about the 'philosophical nature' of his Iran endeavour, which will be synopsised in hopefully a subtle but fruitful way in the last chapter.

Almond sliced deeply into Nietzsche's texts, showing that Nietzsche's favourable disposition towards Islam stems from the fact that it seems to be 'less modern' – less emancipated, less Enlightened, less democratic – leading Almond to isolate four categories of Nietzsche's appropriation of Islam for his critique of modernity: Islam's 'un-Enlightened condition', with all its social consequences for issues of equality; its perceived masculinity, or to use a more manly word, its 'manliness'; its perceived non-judgementalism; and its affirmative character, leading Nietzsche to consider Islamic cultures, alongside the Roman, Japanese, Homeric and Scandinavian cultures, as 'more honest' cultures, purer – not weakened by the *ressentiment* of Christianity and its influence on the West's self-understanding; in other words, not weakened by the life-denying values of chastity, meekness and equality, which he considered to be typical of the Occident (Almond 2007:9–10). Almond meticulously disseminated every one of these four categories of Nietzsche's appropriation of Islam as 'more honest and pure', showing that Nietzsche followed exactly the same logic as those of generations of 'old European Orientalists' before him, who again and again fixated on Medieval Islam in their interpretations, characterising Islam as incapable of democracy, as fanatical, as socially unjust, as combative and as antagonistic. The only difference between Nietzsche and the Orientalists who preceded him is that he affirmed these prejudices instead of lamenting them (Almond 2007:10–21). Nietzsche's Orientalism thus merely featured on a meta-level.

However, Almond (2007:21–22) argued that Nietzsche differed from his Orientalist predecessors in one crucial sense, namely, that he sympathetically viewed Islam as a 'pool of signs' to employ in



his critique of modernity, using Islamic imagery in uniquely self-serving, modern-critical terms. According to Almond, in an eloquent affirmation of a consistent theme in this book, which is based solely on Foucault's Iran writings, it is precisely this 'self-serving attitude' which characterised Foucault's perspective on the events in Iran in 1978–1979 as events that should be understood according to modern-critical considerations: the uniqueness of Nietzsche's Orientalism is thereby repeated, if not broadened. According to Almond (2007:22–23), the complexity of Foucault's approach to the Islamic Other lies in a consecutive analysis and appropriation of Islam's alterity: a critique of what makes Islam *Other*, yet at the same time keeping Islam docile, in its place.

Almond (2007:27–32) considered Nietzsche's influence on Foucault in his evaluation of non-European cultures as absolutely profound, which, combined with Foucault's unique and subtle 'essentialisation of the West', should be integral in our understanding of Foucault's perspectives on Iran. To understand Foucault's views on the events in Iran, according to Almond, one should actually not start with the Orient, but the Occident in Foucault's thought (in this crucial sense, Almond and Lazreg overlap again). Again, in a refined examination, Almond shows how the Occident, and the repetition of the word itself, plays a central role in all of Foucault's projects – Foucault is forever reminding us of the Western specificity of his subject, 'always careful not to stray too far outside the limits of his tribe' (Almond 2007:23).

The repetition of the word Occident is Foucault's way of emphasising the geocultural locatedness of the language game he is scrutinising, his technique of avoiding any lapse into an 'unthinking universalism'. Foucaultian key phrases such as 'we Western Others' and 'the limit-experience of the Western world' indicate for Almond Foucault's sensitive awareness of the limitations of his own vocabulary.

A paradox now arises: is it precisely Foucault's desire to delineate the finite, limited, Occidental boundaries of the collection of ideas and practices he is studying that leads to an indirect

‘essentialisation of the West’ (and implicitly, ‘the East’)? Almond (2007:24) did not forward this oxymoron as a critique or judgement against something banal or obvious in Foucault’s work: he was merely stating that wherever the West appears in Foucault’s work, which is practically everywhere, there are notions that silently assume the absent Orient to be its inverse. Foucault’s Occident takes on several elusive, yet sometimes obvious characteristics that vary according to the (kind of) Orient it is being juxtaposed with, whether it is Japan, Tunisia or Iran. One of these characteristics is that of Western superficiality and self-denial *vis-à-vis* Eastern honesty’, as Nietzsche would have it.

Almond (2007:25) displays how often Foucault had followed Nietzsche, representing the East as the lost domain where Europeans used to think, a place where the Orient masculine and the clear affirmation of sexuality and hierarchy remain intact. This Eastern consideration in Almond’s reading (2007:25) is integral to Foucault’s description of power as ‘everywhere’, as technical and positive, rather than judicial and negative, as unashamed of hierarchy, as a ‘healthy attitude toward power’.

Foucault’s Occident however, apart from being ‘less honest’ or at least ‘more dishonest’ than its Orient counterpart, is also more complex, precisely because of its deceit, its dishonesty. The reason-unreason opposition in Western thought is a typical example of the kind of complexity that follows from the not-direct, not-honest, binary thinking of the West, leading to Foucault’s repeated linking of individualist Western subjectivity and the more homogeneous Eastern collectivities (Foucault, cited in Almond 2007):

[T]here has never been in the West [*at least not for a very long time*] a philosophy that was capable of bringing together the practical politics and the practical morality of a whole society. (p. 26)

This notion confirms Foucault’s appreciation of the Iranian revolutionaries’ spontaneous, coherent resistance to power ‘as one’, as a collectivity.

Yet, Almond indicated that this notion is genuinely and acutely ingrained in Foucault's thinking, perceptible throughout his extensive oeuvre: Foucault's 'Orientals' lend themselves to collectivities with far greater ease than his 'Occidentals', giving rise to the notion of Oriental holistic collectivity versus Occidental fragmented individuality, a clash between a harmonious, unchanging Orient and a volatile, mutating Occident (Almond 2007:26). Almond (2007:27–28) daringly asserted that 'Foucault's Orient' carries a social ethos of unity that cannot any longer be found in his Occident (which has long moved on, which could after modernity never again be viewed in utopian terms), becoming a paradise-state of Nietzschean innocence where power is exercised freely, a place where it is still possible for the state to intervene in its subjects' lives without it being viewed or experienced as problematic.

Scrutinising Foucault's *Order of Things* and the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Almond (2007:29) elaborates on Foucault's volatile Occident versus this unspoken, silent, 'unthought' Orient, which lies as a sort of palimpsest in Foucault's texts – in between other Foucaultian key phrases, such as 'the fate of the West', 'our modernity' and the 'old rational goal of the West', lies a silent Orient, with all the inverse qualities assigned to it: serenity, freedom from the death of their God and all the tragedy that death invokes. In the Orient, gods are still alive. That is why the 'Orient' is a place where political spirituality (can) flourish and thrive.

Almond's examination, therefore, does not only confirm the repeated emphasis in this book that Foucault's enterprise in Iran was above all other considerations modern-critical in nature and orientation: Almond even provided us with a description of the precise Nietzschean development in Foucault's thought in this regard, with the interchange between the fragmented Occident and the intact Orient – an interplay that formed the initial and most profound Foucaultian inclination, namely, his quite elementary contra-modern constitution in Iran. The staunch, silent demeanour of the masses in Iran in 1978 was for Foucault

an expression of the intense, masculine yet static energy of the Orient, unlike any of the Occident could ever again generate.

After providing an overview of Foucault's first 'real' contact with Islam in Tunisia, working at the University of Tunis from 1966 to 1968, where Foucault found 'something refreshingly active' about the political struggles in Tunisia at the time (the students' lack of theoretical knowledge about Marx and Sartre being more than compensated for by 'their violence', their 'radical intensity', their 'impressive momentum' [Almond 2007:31]), clearly a prologue to his experience in Tehran in 1978), Almond (2007:31-34) proceeds to interpret Foucault's Iran writings himself. Almond's reading is an invigorating exhibition of some of the best the dedicated Foucault scholarship has had to offer on this subject, even up to 2019.

According to Almond (2007:35-36), the 'static yet violent' energy Foucault witnessed on the streets of Tehran in the last months of 1978 was the expression of a force Foucault deemed not possible within European boundaries - again, almost immediately, contrasting East and West in his experiences. Almond (2007:35-36) is taken by just how closely Foucault's preferred terminology in his Iran writings resembles Nietzschean terminology. Examples of terms and phrases used in Foucault's Iran writings, which Almond connected with the explicit Nietzschean influence, are 'life-affirmation', 'the militaristic', 'the Medieval', 'a regime of truth close to that of the Greeks [...] and the Arabs of Maghreb', 'vitality' and 'consciousness'. And there are quite a few more.

The first step in Foucault's modern-critical endeavour in Iran is depicted as an opportunity to remind Marxists of their own epistemological finitude, having Iran as a reminder of how culturally finite the West's idea of 'revolution' really was (Almond 2007:35). Once again, for Foucault (as for Nietzsche), Islam becomes a nostalgic glimpse on what Europe had lost and how Europe 'used to think': for Almond, by travelling to Iran, Foucault was actually travelling back in time - to a time where there was still a possibility of a transcendental faith, which could 'move things in this world' to a set of practices 'we Europeans', as Nietzsche would say, 'no longer' (for a very long

time though) believed in'. Iran thus constituted for Foucault a positive space, a space where his notion of political spirituality, with its clear theoretical potential for a reconfiguration of traditional (modern) subject-object schemes, could flourish (Almond 2007):

[A] space (thus) [...] where the possibility of a spiritual dimension to the political quotidian has remained intact [...] the East becomes the retainer of a forgotten vitality, the preserver of a wisdom, which has long since trickled through European fingers [...] what Foucault is seeing, in effect, is a *reversal of the French revolution*. (pp. 36–37; *emphasis in original*)

For Almond (2007:37), the energy of the Islamic revolution becomes a 'disruptive energy and a positive moment of discontinuity'. Foucault's Iran writings therefore 'serve a purpose in the wider context of his writings [...] a collapse of Occidental teleologies and provincializer of Western historiography'. The notion of the Iran revolution as a dissociative, subversive force brings to the fore Foucault's 'fascination' – a notion which has in this book repeatedly been confirmed and acknowledged as indeed correct – with the spontaneous, almost insane nature of the Iranians' revolt, with the uncontainable energy of a people breaking free from Western hegemony: whilst his fascination was mostly implicit, it has in the previous chapters been shown just how explicit that fascination in the end turned out to be, with reference to, in almost lyrical terms, his depiction of the revolt as one executed with 'with bare hands', against one of the biggest military forces in the world at the time.

This mad energy of the demonstrators, as they resisted the control and containment of the West, offered a threat to modern Europe in particular, the same kind of threat the 'free reign of Medieval madness' held for the asylums and clinics of the 18th century. Therefore, and there is no other reason, this energy had to be ridiculed, mocked and scorned by Western commentators. That is why Foucault's reputation was damaged: not because of Foucault's Iran writings or anything he said or wrote at the time, but because of Foucault's quasi-teleological,

Marxist jesters' last attempts to breathe a final Western certainty from their vapourising lungs, when all that is 'solid', *already* 'melted' into air.

Foucault 'in Iran', with all his restraint and ironic peculiarities, which Almond reworked in abundant fashion, is always still a 'Western thinker about the East', or, to again use the delineation, a 'self-conscious Greek in Persia'. This delineation is, according to Almond's own and inimitable breakdown, especially valid, in at least two regards: firstly, Foucault was indubitably impressed by Iran's Islamic-Oriental wholeness, its unity and the absence of a brusque (and consumerist) individuality; secondly, he was convinced of the durability and non-volatility of its institutions, especially its religion, which itself is forcefully old. As we have seen in terms of rather understating arguments thus far, the 'solidarity' and 'unity' of the Iran revolution are aspects often stressed in Foucault's Iran writings, yet he is considered to have overlooked that sense of individuality (or in-community), at least with regard to Afary and Anderson's (2005) reception of Foucault's 'natural dissidents' of the revolution – their nominated 'women', 'homosexuals' and 'many secularists'.

There were indeed 'internal struggles' in the revolution: Almond's analysis is absolutely correct in this regard, and Foucault did not deny the truth and validity of any of these struggles. Neither does the author: of course there were women, children and other vulnerable subjects in Iran at the time. Foucault did not abolish them, but at the same, he never proclaimed to rescue them. He was ever too silent and delicate a thinker to be some 'salvation figure' for anyone of any kind: especially his 'true kind', whether they be Western, French, intellectual, or gay – or not. Again, Foucault was a philosopher and not a prophet. Who looks for more, either in his personality, his numerous personal guises or his philosophical pursuits, will be profoundly disenchanted.

Almond (2007) nonetheless went further and posed that, uncharacteristic for a thinker as self-critical as Foucault, there

appears to be for Foucault no doubt about the correctness of his analysis of the revolution itself:

[A]t no point in any of his Iran writings did Foucault seem to wonder whether his conviction of the oneness of the Iranians, their unity, their madness and everything else he witnessed in the streets of Tehran, may have been facilitated by his utter unfamiliarity with the culture he was observing. (p. 39)

When Foucault (1988a:215–216) stated in an interview that what had struck him in Iran ‘is that there is not a struggle between different elements’ and ‘we met in Iran the collective will of a people’, it seems as if his self-awareness essentially as a tourist in Iran was mainly absent; it seems this Greek in Persia was, for Almond, not self-conscious enough. At this point, the author would have to slightly fluctuate from Almond’s otherwise solid analysis. There are, according to the reading of the primary texts presented in the previous chapters, many examples which would show *how much* uncertainty Foucault radiated, not only during the time of the writing of his Iran essays and clearly in the texts themselves, but even in his preparation for his expeditions and his ‘vagueness’ about his philosophical disposition towards what he was possibly going to find in Iran. To quote just a few of those remarks again: ‘[i]ntellectuals will merely work together with journalists at the point where ideas and events intersect’ (Foucault, in Eribon 1992:282); ‘I go to see what is happening, rather than referring to what is taking place’ (Foucault, in Miller 1993:308, fn. 82); and ‘let us admit that “we Westerners” would be in a poor position to give advice to the Iranians on this matter’ (Foucault 1978e:213; cf. Foucault 1978h:220). In terms of Lazreg’s consequent depiction of an ‘already very early Occident-Orient divide’ in Foucault’s thought, as thoroughly isolated by both these two authors, it is therefore only to an extent true that he ‘already knew what he was going to experience in Iran’ (Almond 2007:41).

Yet, Almond’s conclusion can be accepted for the best part of it: it is indeed true that Foucault’s perceptions of the ‘insane energy’ of the Iranians, and what he observed to be the ‘authentic

and affirmative' nature of their religion, and what he thought they 'forever were and always will be', namely, 'deeply spiritual', with all its reconfiguring consequences for the 'old Western subject-object scheme'; of what he understood to be the millennia-old permanence of their institutions; of what he considered to be the absolute homogeneity of their collectivity, are not what he actually found in the streets of Tehran. He found the epistemological conditions for those perceptions already in Nietzsche and in his brief encounter with Islam during his two-year lecture tour in Tunisia.

Whether it was unconscious or not, stated Almond (2007:41), the Islamic Orient that Foucault found in Iran reflected the same unique Orientalism we find in Nietzsche's *Der Antichrist* and *Geneaologie der Moral*, the same decisive rejection of modernity, 'the same association with Greeks and Romans'. Almond in the process does not acknowledge Foucault's 'self-consciousness', his uncertainty and vagueness, which is crucial. His analysis of Foucault's Occident is formidable; however, also this commentator goes too far, taking Foucault where he would not want to be. The implicit assertion that Foucault was not self-conscious and therefore not self-critical enough, that he was unaware of his silent Orient, of his own prejudices, of his indebtedness to Nietzsche with regard to the Islamic Other, is off the mark. The tense, uncertain tone of Foucault's Iran writings and interviews does not substantiate this claim. That is why the notion of Foucault in Iran being a *self-conscious* 'Greek in Persia' is stressed so repeatedly in this work.

One would be able to isolate some thematic parallels between Almond's analysis and Eric Paras' equally intriguing 'Foucault 2.0' contra-standardised reception, with specific regard to the later Foucault's notion of subjectivity, which undoubtedly - and consciously - rehabilitated pertinent Oriental sentiments, especially in the first two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Paras approaches Foucault not from his standardised texts and famous publications, but from his less well-known published lectures at Collège de France during the last decade of his life,



setting a mature Foucault within the broader context of French and Western intellectual history.

Almond did not investigate Foucault's two Iranian expeditions as such: he concentrated on the division between the Occident and Orient in Foucault's thought and the way it predisposed him to view the events in Iran from a Nietzschean, modern-critical angle. Yet, it must be emphasised that Foucault was critically aware of the fact that he had no clear philosophical objective, in the conventional sense, for his Iran undertaking, that he was vague with purpose, that he radiated uncertainty, that he was aware of his own limitedness – whilst Almond maintains that Foucault knew exactly what he was doing and simply was not self-critical enough.

## ■ 'Inconsistent?'

As Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi was writing his now leading book on the topic (for a solid review, see Bargu 2017:1–6), *Foucault in Iran – Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (2016; for an initial indication of his defence of Foucault, see Ghamari-Tabrizi 2009:270–290), many colleagues and critics asked the author, who himself is existentially closely linked to the Iranian revolution of more than four decades ago: 'why should we care about what Foucault says about the Iranian Revolution?'; 'Is he not just another abstruse French intellectual with the colonial habit of poking his nose into another peoples' affairs?' Tabrizi took those questions seriously. He envisaged his work not to be a commentary of Foucault's academic opus, but rather to utilise Foucault's Iran writings as 'a perfect window through which one could look at the revolutionary events in Iran outside the discursive frames that make revolutions legible' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:xiii). The fact that the revolution in Iran altered Foucault's theory of power and subjectivity has for Tabrizi less to do with Foucault than with the ongoing conceptual significance of the Iranian revolution itself (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:xiii).

Tabrizi (2016:xiii) argues that at the centre of Eurocentrism is the acknowledgement of hypothetical meaning to European historical experience – such as ‘class formation, race and gender relations, state and politics, life-course and ageing, power and subjectivity’. The universal is in this generalising sense the ‘European tangible’. In his Iran writings, Foucault presented significant indicators regarding how to understand the Iranian revolution, but precisely *not* as an example of Eurocentric theories of power, politics, and history. Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:xiii) is, however, convinced that, in the end, Foucault ‘failed to acknowledge the theoretical significance’ or conjectural meaning of the Iranian revolution. According to Tabrizi, although Foucault presented a theory of subjectivity in his later writings, he never articulated that theory about its origins in the political spirituality of the revolutionary subjects in the streets of Tehran. There is thus an ‘inconsistency’ involved in Foucault’s theory of subjectivity presented during the late 1970s and what his Iran writings themselves reflect.

Tabrizi’s view is a mesmerising reception and one that deserves to be thoroughly explored. According to Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:55–112), the paramount achievement of Foucault’s Iran writings lies in the way Foucault considered the subject neither as a result nor as a fabricator of power, but rather as an agent of opposition to power. Significantly for Tabrizi, Foucault evaded the rather common epistemic violence that indeed turned the revolutionary movement in Iran into a violent enterprise that corresponded to Euro-familiar chronological teleologies. Foucault was convinced that by emancipating their ‘bodies from the prison houses of their souls’, by marching audaciously on the Tehran streets in insubordination to military law, the Iranians re-invented themselves through a transformative action, which we have seen, Foucault typically called ‘political spirituality’, which is a spirituality driven change of subject-object relations, fashioned by multifaceted historical contexts and conditions, yet irreducible to it.

The crispness of Tabrizi’s reception is established therein that he reads the revolt of the Iranians as creating a ‘new Man’ in the Fanonian sense (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:72). This Fanonian Man

was motivated by a partisan rearticulation of the Shia Muslims' rising against injustice, their speaking a 'distinctive language' (acquainted yet new), their inventing a new way of being with the Other and relating to the Self, as well as in their finding particular transformative powers in political *modi*, previously considered to be unmanageable and unsustainable.

Thus, from the same idealistic disposition that Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) assumed, namely, that via the concrete act of resistance the colonialisised subject would expunge past suffering and distress, Foucault, via his distinctive notion of political spirituality, believed that the Iranian revolution would somehow reverse the Iranians' relation with their own history, forceful as it once was, yet fragile and unstable as it had become in the second half of the 20th century. Fanon expected that the emancipated new Man had the ability and the historical compulsion to introduce a radically new opening on a blank political slate. However, as the Algerian experience confirmed, the past easily outlives 'the revolution', its weight flustering the present. According to Tabrizi's argument, Foucault attempted to accentuate the weight of 'living the revolution', but he, like Fanon, ignored the possibility that the same vast revolutionary vigour could then relapse into firing up an oppressive, harsh and tyrannical state apparatus.

Foucault and Fanon, according to Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:72–75), also have in common something conceivably even more significant, namely, that they both had an 'inadequate familiarity of the very culture that has given rise to the emancipatory battle', on which both referenced. For example, in his *Dying Colonialism*, Fanon attempted to 'reinterpret cultural practices in Algerian society outside their abstract, anachronistic context'. Although Fanon was profoundly engrossed in the Algerian conflict, he was not fluent in Arabic and had a remarkably restricted understanding of Islam and its relation to Algerian society. He however correctly indicated that cultural insignia are never fixed, neither in their meaning nor in the practical expression thereof. However, Fanon failed to recognise how these signs, as supple and consulted as they might appear, still exist in deeply entrenched, persistent

structures of power and control, predominantly so in gender relations.

Fanon, for instance, linked women's 'ardent love of the home' as a sign of challenge to the colonial structure that has disavowed mutual justification of interaction between the *oikos* and the *polis*, the home and society at large. The Algerian woman, as Fanon asserted, in imposing such a constraint on herself, in choosing a mode of existence reduced in range, was in fact deepening her sense of confrontation, preparing her for revolutionary hostility. Yet, the vivacity and the revolutionary spirit have been kept alive by the woman mainly whilst 'in the home'. Women, therefore, assumed the cover of the veil to create a sort of 'inverted panopticon' against the French colonial officers. Fanon believed that the revolutionary war in Algeria had presented a displacement of the 'old myths' and had altered seemingly irrevocable gender relations in Algeria.

Of course, Fanon's sensitivity for the revolutionary-constructive presence of Islam in Algeria was made possible by his profound participation in the revolution. However, for Fabrizi, Fanon 'lacked a nuanced appreciation of the complexity and significance of religion in Algerian society' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:58). Similarly, for Tabrizi, Foucault's view of Islam and the way the revolutionaries adopted it in the streets of Tehran were significantly influenced by the political spirituality that he indeed correctly identified as the guiding light of the revolution.

However, by (primarily) appraising Massignon and Corbin, who centralised mystical Shi'ism and Sufi transcendentalism in their account of the historical development of Islamic thought, Foucault was almost prompted to understand the revolution he witnessed in terms of a spiritual restoration of these very long-standing 'Seekers of the Truth'. Although Foucault appropriately highlighted the importance of 'the hegemonic position of religion in giving rise to the revolutionary movement', he failed to recognise 'the deeply rooted networks and ethos of legalistic and doctrinal Islam that would eventually dominate the post-revolutionary state politics' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:74). Foucault,

according to Tabrizi's reading, was also too committed to assigning 'Otherness' to the Iranian revolution. As we have seen in the appraisal of Lazreg's and Almond's indicators to Foucault's 'unique Orientalism', Foucault attempted consciously not to evaluate the revolution through the magnifying glass of a Western conceptual framework, in the process ironically risked 'Orientalising' it. As a consequence, according to Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:74), he overlooked 'the extent to which the revolution belongs to a historical situation different from, but (still) related to the Western context'. This worked towards what Tabrizi regards as an inconsistency between his texts produced in France in the late 1970s and his Iran writings during the same period.

Tabrizi's findings and conclusion are supported and can be summarised as follows (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:187–192): in his writings on the Iranian revolution, Foucault was sensitive enough to recognise a 'constitutive paradox' of the revolutionary movement. He was convinced that the Iranians at once wanted to produce history, yet at the same time be liberated from history, thus becoming historical subjects without being subjected to modernist-determinist logic; therefore to be 'both included in and to be able to exit from history'. Foucault found the exhibition of this oxymoron in the radical particularity he perceived in the revolutionary movement: in all its aspects, in its spiritual manifestation, in the more often than not obscurity of its positive demands, in its distinctive adamant tone, as well as in its unfathomable transformative ability. Foucault's concept of political spirituality served this paradox and 'immeasurable ability' exceptionally well. He was convinced that the revolutionary movement did not have to stand down to the burdens of a universal-teleological sense of history. He rejected any attempts to make the revolution easily comprehensible with relaxed indications to all kinds of modern binaries of the 'premodern-modern', the 'secular-religious', the 'reactionary-progressive', the 'male-female', as well as the 'subjugated-emancipated' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:187–188).

For Foucault, understanding the Iranian revolution required a kind of a time-chart that at once recognised the contingencies and variables within which the revolution was disclosed.

The revolution and its aftermaths appear inevitable only (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016):

[7]to those who expunge those contingencies in and conceptualise the revolutionary movement in a historical narrative, in which the colonised appears as the European past and Europe shows the colonised its own future. (p. 188)

Foucault saw in the Iranian revolution an example and expression of his profoundly anti-teleological philosophy: a revolution that cannot be modestly appropriated into the normative ‘enlightened’ discourses of modernity’s views on history. What concerned (and indeed fascinated) Foucault in Iran was precisely the same feature for which his critics, such as the Broyelles, ridiculed him, namely, its ambiguity. For him, the revolution produced a ‘new subject’ with an unstipulated relation to the Self and this Self’s history. It was as much his captivation by death as his fascination by an aesthetics of violence, than the inexplicability of human behaviour in revolt, that spurred his Iran writings.<sup>69</sup>

Foucault abstracted the notion of political spirituality not in defence of the establishment of an Islamic republic, which soon turned out to be a violent theocracy, but in commendation of the transformative abilities of the revolution. The spirituality he observed in the streets of Tehran ‘had nothing to do with either doctrinal commitments to Islam or devotion to the undisputed leader of the revolution, Khomeini’ (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:189). As we have seen, by this spirituality, Foucault meant the acts and practices through which one could transform oneself into a new subject – indeed, a ‘subject that one could never imagine capable of becoming’ (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:190).

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69. My interpretation is that Miller’s (1993:309-315) – however confrontational about it – reading of Foucault’s appreciation of the spontaneous eruption of resistance to established power, of the exploration of the contemporary disclosed limits of rationality, of the dubious nature of discipline, of the enigmatic voices of Otherness, of the violent confrontation with identity, of puzzling labyrinths and dark esoteric corners, of the entropy of madness and hence the mad creativity unleashed by people willing to risk death, should not necessarily be understood as in opposition to Tabrizi’s accent on the intrinsic appeal of the revolution itself.

During the last few years of his life, Foucault linked this spirituality to ethics and *parrhesia*, or fearless speech. The activist demonstrators in the streets of Tehran showed him the prospect of a transformative politics, which is one that can be practised outside the normative corset of the Enlightenment. The revolution disclosed to him that in the care of the Self, rather than Self-absorption, the ethical subject executes a certain Self-creation and is willing to sacrifice for it. The violent aftermath of the revolution that gave rise to the amalgamation of power structures by the clergy and the subsequent reign of terror should not relativise the worth and consequence of Foucault's endorsement of the revolution. That is why, in response to his critics, he insisted that *how* the revolution was lived must be distinguished from its 'success' or its 'failure'.

This is Tabrizi's take on Foucault's involvement in Iran, and the second half of this book is aligned to his inferences: give or take minor differences. However, there is by way of conclusion a final and extremely important contribution in Tabrizi's work, namely, in the way that he spectacularly deflates two familiar hostile claims about Foucault's presence and involvement in Iran (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:190–192). Firstly, Tabrizi disputes the widespread perception that the revolutionary initiative in Iran revealed its true colours by accentuating as so-called 'internal tension' between the secularist and Islamist forces, which eventually made it possible for the Shia clergy to 'steal' Iran's leadership. It is unquestionably true that communists and liberal political organisations played a significant role in the earliest phases of the revolution: yet these groups never understood themselves as the agents of 'secular forces' in the revolutionary undertaking. A substantial majority of the involved communist organisations actually considered liberalism to be the main inner antagonist of the revolutionary movement. For example, until a very late point of the revolution, the liberals vigorously promoted the old slogan: 'let the king reign but not govern!'. To bring the full progressive potential of the revolting masses to expression,

the communists were convinced that they first and foremost had to triumph over these liberal schemes to 'save the monarch'.

For the entire period of the revolutionary movement from January 1978 to at least April 1979, the Iranian left-wing remained firmly on the side of the anti-Shah and anti-imperialist extremism, the undisputable leader of which was Khomeini. Both in theory and practice, only in a teleological perspective on history was a binary opposition between 'seculars' and 'Islamists' amongst these revolutionaries therefore possible. Political goals were nevertheless not expressed in those terms and seculars were thus considered only those who did resist the revolution. Consequentially, safeguarding secularism politically in the period from January 1978 to February 1979, effectively meant 'supporting the Shah'. During the same period, there were commentators outside Iran who warned about the now definite religious character of the revolution. Yet, Foucault attempted to remain alert to the revolutionary vocabularies inside Iran, with all its obscurities, rather than projecting a 'normative European discourse of revolution' back onto the Iranian revolt.

The tension between what a proper revolution 'should be' and the street bound realities of the Iranian experience also moulded the depictions of gender politics after the revolution. As Tabrizi effectively illustrates, the March 1979 demonstrations in Tehran against the compulsory donning of the veil mirrored a clear split between the way Iranian women who themselves partook in these demonstrations understood their predicament and the way Western feminists (like the exiled 'Atoussa H'; cf. 'Foucault and "Atoussa H"' in ch. 7) justified their intervention on behalf of their Iranian counterparts. This is truly an important contribution of Tabrizi's work: he shows that Western feminists' understanding of the female predicament in and after the revolution was more often than not misguided, if not pedantic. A good example is the conventions French and American feminists held in Tehran and Paris to 'save' Iranian women, with whom they quite obviously had neither a natural nor a thorough theoretical connection. They stood in support of their Iranian 'sisters', not because of or on behalf of these



‘sisters’, but because they stood for the universalistic demands of feminism and emancipation, as embedded in Western modern liberation discourse. This is the reason why Foucault did not support the ‘feminist cause’. Actually, in every single instance in his Iran writings, Foucault purposely privileged the particularity of the Iranian voices over the pedantic, ‘all-inclusive’ spheres of universality and the undiscerning teleological vocabulary of the Western modernistic understanding of progress.

Tabrizi’s (2016:191–192) second devaluation of typical Western claims about the Iran revolution is set up in his critical and detailed interrogation of the common contention that the Islamic reign of terror after February 1979 was the unavoidable outcome of the revolution and the so-called ‘expected development of Islamism’. Without exception, those who attacked Foucault so passionately from 1978 to even still in 1980 understood Islamism as a political movement for ‘the realisation of an essentialised Islam without significant distinction in its application in Iran or Saudi Arabia’. They castigated and rebuked Foucault for his ‘failure’ to distance himself from this ‘archaic fascism, and they linked this failure to Foucault’s critical view of the Enlightenment rationality’ (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:191).

In terms of Tabrizi’s analysis however, as a political ideology, Islamism has always been ‘informed by the contingencies of time and place and has reflected particular historical trajectories of its emergence’. For instance, Tabrizi coherently argues throughout the course of his book (but especially in pp. 19–54) that even Khomeini considered distinctive political theologies in diverse periods in his life: for example, at one stage Khomeini promoted orthodox Shia political quietism and defended the monarchical order against chaos and unruliness; at another stage, toward the end of his life, Khomeini accepted the codes of anti-monarchism, republicanism and democratic politics. At one stage he was very negative about women’s involvement in unrestricted community life; at another stage, he held that precisely without women’s participation and concrete involvement, the revolution would fail. Therefore, Tabrizi commendably reproaches those dull observers

of the revolution who treated Khomeini as an inert, fixed monolith, and not as an evolving, fluctuating subject. This is another remarkable contribution by Tabrizi, not to be found in any of the earlier commentaries on Foucault's involvement in Iran.

Indeed, Foucault himself was such an evolving, fluctuating subject, like Khomeini and all the other participants in the revolution, one of many subjects whose subjectivity was changed by the revolt. That is why Foucault never had any intention to become a 'penitent liberal', as so many have argued he should become, 'confessing his mistake'. Foucault recognised anew the value of and committed himself to his notion of political spirituality, the possibility of a new form of subjectivity and a new sense of political virtue in exploits of subject-object transformations. Revolutions at the margins, as in Iran, have always presented what Tabrizi calls a 'double consciousness', namely, an intent to claim the relevant universals and simultaneously an aspiration to proclaim their particularity. It is in this minimalistic particularity of the revolutionaries in Iran where Tabrizi positions Foucault's fervour in the last years of his life, about the 'care of the Self' and an 'ethics of Selfhood'.

However – and this is where Tabrizi draws the line – Foucault was not consistent in the translation of his own theoretical positions in the late 1970s to the streets of Tehran – and vice versa, and specifically so (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016):

Like Hegel before him, who never acknowledged the *real* slaves and the *real* masters in the struggle for freedom in world history, Foucault remained silent about the origins of his newfound interest in ethics and the hermeneutics of the Self. His silence gave rise to a commonplace assertion that the critic *par excellence* of modern governmentality saw its prudence before the end of his life. (pp. 191-192)

This is at the heart of what Tabrizi's isolates as, what can be called on the basis of his reading, an 'inconsistent' Foucault.<sup>70</sup> In terms of his analysis, Foucault's Iran writings are quite certainly not to

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70. Except for one reference (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:166) which itself has to be read in context, Tabrizi does not use the term outright to depict Foucault's 'inconsistency', but his whole reception points towards it.

be valued as brochures for understanding Islamism. Foucault might have been fascinated by the aesthetics of the revolution or its death rituals, but what motivated his writing, as far as Tabrizi is concerned, was Foucault's conviction that rationality in its Enlightenment guise 'has not closed the gate of unknown possibilities for human societies'. Of course, such a conviction is upsetting, precarious and hazardous, as the carnages committed by the Islamic republic confirm. Nevertheless, how a history of the present discloses itself and what the future holds 'must not remain in the prison-house of the past, be it in the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment or other kinds of fundamentalisms, religious or otherwise' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:192).

As has been denied that Foucault was in any way 'seduced' by Islamism (see 'Seduced?' in ch. 8) yet acknowledged that he was 'Orientalist', but in a very unique Nietzschean sense (see 'Orientalist?' in ch. 8), the basis of the outcome of Tabrizi's investigation is supported, in that Foucault was indeed 'inconsistent' to a partial degree, in the sense that his theoretical work from the period was not reflected clearly enough in his Iran writings, and that his Iran writings did not find their way adequately back to his last works on the care of the Self. However, the most recent reconsiderations on Foucault's predicament in Iran, in the gripping edition of *Iran Namag* (2018:3/2), shed light on all these three deliberations – and more.<sup>71</sup>

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71. Sections 'Seduced?' and 'Orientalist?' of Chapter 8 represent a substantial reworking, with permission from the publisher, from Beukes (2009b:116–122) regarding the author's reception of the works of Afary and Anderson (2005) and Postel (2006), whilst Almond's (2007) Nietzschean reading was maintained as it was initially presented (Beukes 2009b:120–122). Beukes (2009b) was published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence, according to which permission was granted for reworking.

# What was there to liberate in Iran?

**Keywords:** Foucault and Islamofascism; Foucault and Neoliberalism; Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi; *Iran Namag*; Michiel Leezenberg; Corey McCall; *parrhesia*; Maxine Rodinson; Mohamad Tavakoli; Bryan Turner.

## ■ What was there to liberate in Iran

At the heart of this chapter is the unavoidable question, after the fact: *what was there to liberate in Iran (and what is there to liberate elsewhere)*? This question obviously cuts to the critique of Foucault's notion of freedom (cf. Prozorov 2007:25). To speak of 'Foucault's notion of freedom' may appear contentious: his work is after all often read as refuting the mere prospect of self-determination, 'both empirically in its theory of the "carceral society"' (Prozorov 2007:25; cf. Foucault 1977b:165-198) and theoretically in its foreboding of the death of that peculiar creature called 'man', for whom freedom is presumably important. Likewise, Foucault's discourse on sexuality persuasively scorns emancipatory positions linked to 'sexual liberation' as complicit

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in the approaches to power they condemn and emphasises how 'liberation' actually functions as 'the seductive promise of the rationalities of government' (Prozorov 2007:25): '[t]he irony of this deployment of sexuality is in having us believe that our "liberation" is in the balance' (Foucault 1976:159).

Foucault's philosophical approach is penetratingly critical of those conventions that are usually held to be prerequisites for any significant idea of freedom, undermining in the process both the essentialist notion of a knowing, acting and free subject and the teleological visualisation of the enlightened emancipation of humanity. Foucault treats this modern assertion of freedom with a vigorous amount of distrust. That is why Foucault's approach to freedom is often misunderstood as a rather limited project, only 'exposing the falsity of existing freedoms and designs for liberation, but incapable of advancing its own affirmation of freedom' (Prozorov 2007:26). However, this chapter presents two theses that confirm that there is a certain kind of freedom at work in Foucault's mind, which requires neither a concept of the anterior subject nor a teleology of liberation. Very recent contributions in an exceptional gift to the Foucault scholarship are employed, namely, from a special issue in the respected quarterly for Iranian Studies, *Iran Namag* (03 February 2018), dedicated (for the best part of it) to the question of Foucault in Iran, as edited by Mohamad Tavakoli and Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi. These contributions concentrate on Foucault and Neoliberalism, his relation to French secular thought and his understanding of the role of the intellectual in the quest for freedom.

## ■ Foucault and Neoliberalism

Michiel Leezenberg, the Amsterdam scholar who *de facto* introduced the philosophical significance of Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution more than two decades ago with his crucial and timely analysis of Foucault's understanding of political spirituality (Leezenberg [1998] 2004) was again at the forefront

of contemporary scholarship with his article, 'Foucault and Iran reconsidered: Revolt, religion and Neoliberalism'.<sup>72</sup> Leezenberg started by investigating Foucault's understanding of the concept of revolution, which differs significantly from the Marxist consideration thereof. Actually, as Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:68–72) noted, one of Foucault's key objectives in his Iran writings was a critique of the Marxist version of revolt, supposedly pushed forward by class oppositions (Leezenberg 2018:9). Leezenberg points out that the stronghold of Marxism on the French Left during the 1970s should never be understated: the unyielding contra-Marxist character of Foucault's Iran writings, especially when they are read together with his lectures on Neoliberalism, is undoubtedly what then annoyed and still angers his modernist and secularist readers orientated towards the left – precisely leftists like Afary and Anderson (2005).<sup>73</sup>

Foucault's rejection of Marxist politics does however not mean that he overruled emancipatory revolutionary politics altogether: what he did was to interrogate the applicability of a specific (and historically and geographically explicit) notion of revolution (Leezenberg 2018:9; cf. Foucault 1994:759). That is why Foucault accentuated the problems in describing religiously enthused revolts, such as in Iran, as 'revolutions' in the Western-historical sense of the word, which include notions of, for example, class oppositions and vanguards (Leezenberg 2018:9; cf. Foucault 1994:745). Qualifying the Iranian event rather as a 'theatrical event' than a revolution in the modernist sense of the word, and as a communal ceremony analogous to the enactment of a Greek tragedy, Foucault argued that the Iranian event did not present a

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72. Leezenberg (2018:4–28). The author is in this eminent Foucault-scholar's debt for the time he set aside for an extensive interview at his office at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, on 21 May 2019.

73. Leezenberg (2018:6–9) is vehemently critical of what he considers Afary and Anderson's reading of Foucault to be reductionist, echoing several of Ghamari-Tabrizi's (2016:75–112) reserves about their reception and interpretation of Foucault's involvement in Iran. Leezenberg (2018:9) depicts the editorial work of Zamora and Behrent (2015) as in the same reductionist vein as that of Afary and Anderson.

class struggle as the key component of either its terminology or its outcome: religiously inspired revolts like the one in Iran are not instigated by economic pressures, but have a 'pure political character' and are inspired by a religion that has pertinent immanent ideals and strives towards a radical change, if not 'correction', of the world (Leezenberg 2018:10; cf. Foucault 1994:748).

As we have seen, in his Iran writings, Foucault consistently advocated that the revolt in Iran was branded by precisely the non-existence of class oppositions and a vanguard initiative of some kind. The uprising in Iran brought together all socio-economic layers of Iranian society, in a combined act of sheer will and a unified determination, namely, for the Shah to abdicate. This collective will according to Foucault represented a revolt 'against politics' as such, rather than advancing a definite party-political agenda. That is why the revolution was for him the 'most modern and the maddest revolt' because it was at once directed against both liberalism and socialism. Furthermore, the revolution was led against both liberal and socialist forms of governments' imposing a secularised, modernist subjectivity on its populaces (Leezenberg 2018:10; cf. Foucault 1994:716).

Foucault's robust accent on the unifying character of the will he witnessed on the streets of Tehran, did not implicitly argue for an underestimation of political, ethnic and sectarian differences in Iran (or elsewhere): instead, this emphasis was a contra-Marxist attempt to indicate that the Iranian revolts were not the result of class antagonisms or produced by a 'Leninist vanguard' (Leezenberg 2018:10) of some kind. Leezenberg's erudition in Persian history and literature is thoroughly underscored in his clarification of this contra-Marxist objective, namely, that Foucault was indeed correct in his calling to attention the unique, temporary but decisive alliance between the *mostazafin* [the oppressed] and the *bazaris* [urban merchants]. Leezenberg (2018:10) takes Foucault's corresponding suggestion into definite account, namely, that on the grounds of this unique alliance, Islam might become a revolutionary force elsewhere in the world,

wherever this temporal coalition could be sustained. This would mean that, for example, Palestinian resistance could far simpler be rallied based on this (sort of) alliance, than had it been reliant on Marxist-Leninist rhetoric.

As much as Foucault resisted the marker of him being ‘a prophet’ of some kind, there was indeed something ‘prophetic’ about his intuition in this regard. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the accompanying disintegration of the East Block, new arrangements of rebellious Islamism indeed substituted communism as a vibrant contra-liberal (and anew, an anti-West) political discourse. Yet, Foucault was indeed *not* a prophet: as he could not have foreseen the atrocities caused in the name of the Islamic Republic in Iran after 01 February 1979, he did not and could not have expected that this newly lobbied strength ‘Islamism’, in whatever theological or otherwise sectarian appearance, Sunni or Shia, would eventually copy several Marxist-Leninist ideological elements in its ferocious self-arrangement, thereby becoming one of most violent political forces to manifest itself in the 21st century.

According to Leezenberg (2018:11), Foucault’s resistance to a Marxist understanding of the revolution in Iran should however be interpreted in the broader framework of his theoretical work at the time, notably his lectures on Neoliberalism, which he was preparing and had already started lecturing at the Collège de France at the time of his visits and writings on Iran in the second half of 1978.<sup>74</sup> Foucault was as much captivated by neoliberal technologies of government as he was by the events in Iran: in both aspects, he noticed prospects for transcending existing arrangements of government, such as those in socialism, social democracy, the European welfare state and the kind of secular authoritarianism in Iran before the revolution. This does not point

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74. As indicated, Tabrizi (2016:xiii, 158) is of the opinion that far too little of these lectures found its way back to Foucault’s Iran writings, whilst precious little of his Iran writings found their way back to his theoretical work on for example governmentality, rendering Foucault somewhat ‘inconsistent’, which is a conclusion that is underwritten for the best part of it.



to some atypical utopianism in his thought and certainly does not imply that he was not cautious of the utopian elements in both Neoliberalism and Islamism (Leezenberg 2018:11).

But what is 'Neoliberalism', at least as Foucault understood it? As a point of departure, he distinguished firmly between two prominent varieties of the phenomenon, namely, post-1945 German Ordoliberalism and the Chicago-variant associated with Milton Friedman, as manifested in the 1970s. This decade, of course, brought about its own challenges and crises, especially concerning the development of a so-called 'post-industrial' society, which transformed the Marxist category of the working class and therefore saw the end of Keynesianism. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's radical neoliberal reform policies accentuated the ominous nature of these watersheds and Foucault took a keen interest in it. For him, the question of liberalism was one of 'actuality' – in the sense of 'what is happening to us right now?' (Foucault 1994:783) – just as 'the protests of in the name of Islamic government constituted the immediate and concrete actuality of the Iranians' (Leezenberg 2018:12).

Does this keen interest he took in Neoliberalism suggest that Foucault's philosophical – that is, his unique modern-critical – vision was so obscured by his unfaltering anti-Marxism that he was not able to notice the gloomier edges of Neoliberalism? Several contributions in the editorial work by Zamora and Behrent (2015) conclude that it was indeed the case; arguing that Foucault did not merely take a keen interest in Neoliberalism, but was wholly supportive of it in his endeavours to find a plausible 'other way' than the Marxist ways of the French Left and the French Communist Party as such. Leezenberg (2018:13) indicates *contra* this marking of Foucault being 'positively sympathetic' to Neoliberalism, that Foucault at no point considered neoliberal manifestations of power to be 'less disciplinary' than liberal or socio-democratic types of governmentality, but instead that he insisted that Neoliberalism involves *non-disciplinary* forms of power, in the sense that it is not grounded in the normalisation of

the abnormal and the exclusion of that which cannot be normalised. Neoliberalism thus *does* involve power and process.

Foucault, therefore, saw liberalism – and Neoliberalism in particular – as a non-disciplinary power, in other words, as a non-normalising, modern technology of government. His interest in Neoliberalism was not because he viewed it primarily as an economic doctrine or bourgeois ideology, but indeed as a technology of government (Leezenberg 2018:16). This technology could, as far as Foucault was concerned, be brought to light most effectively outside of Europe, or out of the confrontation between Europe and non-Europe. The ‘actuality’ of Neoliberalism is thus verified when measured against the non-Western world. That is why he was convinced that more philosophical attention must be given to that ‘other world’ and although the notion of ‘revolution’ might have been weakened considerably in the West from the early 1970s onwards, one should be philosophically attentive to (probably but not necessarily different) procedures and expressions of resistance outside Europe in particular. From within the framework of his attention to Neoliberalism, Foucault thus insisted on a serious mindfulness of the historical and geographical specificity of European conceptions of the state (Leezenberg 2018:17), that is, philosophically speaking, what eventually took him to the streets of Tehran.

In other words, the suggestion that the last decades of the 20th century marked the ‘end of the age of revolution’, was rejected by Foucault in his determination that the end of the domination of the idea of revolution does not merely point to a return to specific reformist policies: the very notion of protest is indicative of the brutal factuality of power and always is and remains a struggle against the execution of power. Foucault was neither endorsing the idea of or desire for an Islamic government in his Iran writings nor was he at any stage in his lectures at the time ratifying Neoliberalism as a governmental regime. As Leezenberg (2018:17) in the remainder of his detailed examination specifies, Foucault’s concern was to utilise both the Iran

revolution and Neoliberalism as ‘innovative ways of analysing and criticising both’. Foucault’s investigation into Neoliberalism thus was not an implicit way of endorsing it, as was his Iran experience not a tacit way of endorsing what was taking place in the streets of Tehran. In his lectures on Neoliberalism, he attempted to open up a fresh and at the time largely uncharted way of criticising it as a technology of government, rather than merely considering it as an economic doctrine or brusque political ideology.

What bound Foucault’s views on Neoliberalism to his perspectives on the Iran revolution was his concern with ‘actuality’ and the present, his noted attentiveness to different forms of governmentality, but most importantly, his idea that modern interpretation of ‘revolution’ – which encapsulate the whole Marxist-Leninist glossary – is ‘not a universally applicable concept, but a historically and geographically specified phenomenon’ (Leezenberg 2018:18). Writing and lecturing at a time when both political Islam and neoliberal government were stepping onto the centre stage of international politics, yet still a decade preceding communism’s final demise, Foucault indeed showed a unique insight into what is ‘unprecedented in the present’.

In spite of all the criticisms he was subjected to in his career, especially so after February 1979, there is one thing Foucault could never be accused of: hesitancy and fear of frank speech, as is apparent in the tone and content of his Iran writings. *Parrhesia* was part and parcel of what this philosopher in the last stages of his career was about. Recently, New York philosopher Corey McCall (2018:46–69) investigated these trails of *parrhesia*, read through the lens of governmentality and the contemporary intellectual’s political attempts to interpret, critique and eventually contest modern technologies in Foucault’s Iran writings, juxtaposing his reading to Cooper’s (2014:29–58) and to some extent to Leezenberg’s suggestions, namely, that Foucault’s lectures on Neoliberalism at the time of his expeditions to Iran in

1978 should be read in terms of his Iran writings and even his later work on the care of the self.

Foucault became progressively interested in *parrhesia* as a theoretical premise well after the Iran revolution in his lectures in the early 1980s, although he was already working on it in the lecture series of 1977 to 1978, later published as *Security, territory, population*. In this course, Foucault developed the concepts of ‘conduct’ and ‘counter-conduct’ in power relations, by which Foucault’s understanding of *parrhesia* and the general role of the contemporary intellectual are highlighted as well (McCall 2018:48). Foucault portrays the intellectual as a subject whose actions are always already political – or political ‘before the fact’ – and argues that ever since the French revolution the role of the intellectual has always been associated with ‘prophecy’: although he reservedly accepted this understanding of the intellectual, he accentuated that the intellectual functions in terms of particularities and not the universal (Cooper 2014:32–33). The Iranian revolution provided such a ‘particularity’ in terms of context and geography. Although Foucault refused to ever take the final word on anything and these lectures themselves do not provide the last word or have precedence over his earlier works, they do provide insights into his Iran writings and his understanding of the role of the intellectual in the last years of his life. That is why Leezenberg takes them so seriously.

The significance of Leezenberg’s very recent evaluation of the relation between Foucault’s lectures on Neoliberalism and his Iran writings, both presented in 1978, is manifested in the lucidity of Leezenberg’s analysis: Foucault was in retrospect more interested in the Iranian *revolt* than in the Iranian *revolution* and more concerned with genuine spiritual dimensions of resistance than in Islamic forms of government. His persistent preoccupation with and criticisms of specific techniques of government, as established in his lectures on Neoliberalism at the time, avert any sense of utopianism concerning Iran’s political future – unless of course, one accuses Foucault of a blunt approval of or him, again,

being somehow ‘seduced’ by either Neoliberalism or Islamism. It is true that his lectures on Neoliberalism stayed well clear of polemics, yet this should not be considered an endorsement of Neoliberalism as such. Quite the contrary: when his views on Neoliberalism and Iran are considered in juxtaposition, it becomes clear that both insinuate that the concept of ‘revolution’ as backed by his leftist, specifically Marxist colleagues in France, as a universal given, is in fact a particularity, linked to time, place, history and context. As such Foucault’s Iran writings invite us to reflect on the truly unique character of that revolt, instead of ‘reducing it to allegedly universal but ultimately Eurocentric, categories’ (Leezenberg 2018:26). The question then arises what precisely Foucault’s relation to the French secular thought during that volatile decade of the 1970s involved.

## ■ Foucault and Islamofascism

As sociologist Bryan Turner (2018:30-45) recently has accentuated, religion as such was either largely absent from 20th-century French social theory or was otherwise considered as a riddle that would somehow be settled by history. Religious inclinations were furthermore considered as mere scraps of a past culture, which itself was increasingly problematised by the after-effects of the Enlightenment and French revolution. French Marxist sociology, for the best part of it, enthused by Louis Althusser’s Marxism, thus considered religion only as an ideology that instigated turmoil or increased docility amongst subservient groups.

As far as recent secular Marxist receptions of Islam in France are concerned, Maxine Rodinson,<sup>75</sup> whose work has been referred to a number of times so far, is also considered by Turner to be the most prominent secular scholar of Islam (and the ‘Middle East’ in general) belonging to the late-20th-century generation: as critical

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75. For instance, Rodinson (1978, 1979, 2005).

as Rodinson was about Foucault being ‘naive’ about the developments in Iran, he did open up new avenues for understanding Foucault’s involvement in the Iranian revolution by introducing the concept of ‘Islamofascism’, to describe the Shia revolt as resulting in an Islamic theocracy.<sup>76</sup> From the framework of Islamofascism, Turner readdresses Foucault’s refusal to withdraw his interpretation of Shia radicalism (via his notion of political spirituality), in the process raising a more profound question about the nature of revolution itself: were the two revolutions in Iran in the 20th century, that is, the Constitutional revolution from 1906 to 1911 and the Shia revolution from 1978 to 1979, both historical failures? The sociological features of Foucault’s Iran writings raise in terms of Turner’s reading, an important and persistent question about the destructive, yet inadvertent costs involved in all forms of revolt (Turner 2018:35–37; cf. Turner 2013:107–109).

Like Lazreg, Turner stresses that an interpretation of Foucault’s Iran writings should incorporate his extremely negative relation with Marxism, as well as the fact that these writings really did annoy most scholars of the Orient in France and elsewhere at the time. As has been indicated frequently so far, Foucault’s relation with Marxism and Marxists, in general, was highly charged. This included Rodinson, who was an exponent of the French Orientalist tradition that was deeply influenced by both Marxism and sociology. Like many secular Jews, Rodinson, whose parents died in Auschwitz in 1943, joined the French Communist Party in the 1930s but eventually turned against communism in reaction to the atrocities committed under Stalinism. Fervently anti-communist, Rodinson’s sociological work was nevertheless still firmly grounded in Marxist sociology (Turner 2018:38–39).

There is no doubt that Foucault interpreted the Iran revolution as a spiritual event, yet many Western commentators almost

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76. Turner (2018:31). Note that Turner gives preference to the term ‘Shia revolution’ and not ‘Iranian revolution’, following Nasr’s (2006) detailed explanation. In terms of the latter’s correspondence to the research register, it will be maintained here, whilst acknowledging that ‘Shia revolution’ is technically the better indicator.

from the outset considered it to be fascist. Rodinson indeed used the term 'Islamic fascism' to describe the revolt, whilst other observers referred to 'an authentic Muslim fascism' (Onfray 2007:24, per reference Turner 2018:39) and 'Islamofascism'.<sup>77</sup> Rodinson objected vehemently that the 'great gaps in his knowledge of Islamic history' enabled Foucault to 'transfer the events' in Iran, to accept in most part 'the semitheoretical suggestions of his Iranian friends', and to extrapolate from this by imagining 'an end of history that would make up for the disappointments in Europe and elsewhere' (Rodinson 2005:267; Turner 2018:39).

Not surprisingly Rodinson contested Foucault's notion of political spirituality (as the spark for the revolution) from a Marxist premise, stating that it 'failed to uncover the material causes behind its discontent' (Turner 2018:39). In terms of Rodinson's Marxist interpretation of the event, it was clear that the bigoted nature of the religious elements in the revolt had from the outset refuted the humanist significance Foucault ascribed to it and by doing so, exhibited his political gullibility. A Marxist reading such as Rodinson's will always stress on the fact that political opposition is realised materially and institutionally, conveyed through, for instance, working-class communities, trade unions and socialist political parties – and definitely not through religion-induced revolts. Of course, '[...] multiple cases of political spirituality have existed [...] (yet) all came to an end very quickly' (Rodinson 2005:271; Turner 2018:39).

Foucault, on the other hand, resisted this materialist interpretation and accentuated that he considered the Iran revolution as an alternative to Eurocentric political categories and a charismatic break with history. Such a 'charismatic break' (Turner 2018:42) is not inconceivable in late modernity; but the question is why, even if such a Derridean 'event' is possible, do revolutions

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77. The term was put forward by Ruthven (1990); extended by Berman (2003) and more intensively so by Podhoretz (2007).

ultimately fail? As Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016:60–69) indicated, the air of political defeatism in France after May 1968 did play a role in Foucault's perceptions of the events in Iran because in these events he saw the demonstration of the 'possibility of resistance without participating in or perpetuating a *preconceived* schema of power' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016:68; cf. Turner 2018:42).

Foucault refused to repudiate the contents of his Iran writings, precisely because he did not interpret the events as fascist and *especially* not as Islamofascist. He respected the authenticity of the Iranian revolt and the pure and simple fact that the revolting masses were able to force the Shah to abdicate, against all initial expectations. Again, as is the case in Leezenberg's reading, once one understands that religion is a political force in its own right and 'accepts the notion *contra* Marxism that religion has independent effects and a unique material force, Foucault's interpretation of the events that produced the revolution is not "especially problematic"' (Turner 2018:42). In so far Foucault was 'Orientalist' in his interpretation of the events, he was so in a very particular and qualified sense. Indeed, that unique (Nietzschean) 'Orientalism' enabled him to approach the Iranian revolution without the typical-French sociological baggage of secular Marxism.

Turner's reading of Foucault's involvement in the Iranian revolution is significant because he accentuates – from a sociological framework – that the criticisms of Foucault at the time had more to do with French academic idiosyncrasies than Foucault's support 'for a spiritual revolution in spiritless times' (Foucault 1998a:221). These criticisms emerged from a culture – French, dominantly Marxist and explicitly modernist – that could not recognise the political significance of global religions.

However, these criticisms raise a far more penetrating problem in political philosophy, namely, on the unintended consequences of action (Turner 2018):

Modern Western thought does appear to embrace a metaphysical pathos of despair in promoting the view that the unintended



What was there to liberate in Iran?

consequences of political action are always negative. In this pathos, revolutions have outcomes that are the opposite of the intentions of social actors. This promotes the obvious question: why are there no good unintended consequences? (It seems) Fortune looks unfavourably at protest [...]. (p. 44)

So, was the French revolution itself another failed revolution in which the aspirations of 1789 descended into the violence of 1793? And why had the student revolts of the late 1960s almost no lasting consequences, apart from the effects of violence and anarchy they have created? By pertinent contrast: the profoundly religious protests of 1978 to 1979 in Iran had removed a dictator through a mass movement. That is effectively why questioning Foucault's endorsement of the events in Iran in 1978, is to question any mass movement against oppression and thus to 'resign oneself to the futility of protest' (Turner 2018:45).

# A self-conscious Greek in Persia

**Keywords:** Pierre Blanchet; Claire Brière; Ethics of self-discomfort; Foucault and Nietzsche; Postmodernity; Uncertainty as a philosophical virtue.

## ■ An ethics of self-discomfort

I have learned to keep silent sometimes, and also that one has to learn to talk, to be quiet in the proper way: that a person with backgrounds has to have foregrounds, be it for others, be it for oneself. For the foregrounds are necessary to recover from oneself, and to make it possible for others to live with us. (Nietzsche [1886] 1968:232)

The notions of self-interruption and self-critique, as we have seen, played a vital role in Foucault's 'radiation of uncertainty' about the philosophical nature of his involvement in the Iranian revolution. It is precisely the notions of Foucault's relation to the Self as 'disturbed', as 'displaced' and as one of 'discomfort' in terms of Iran, thus pointing towards a 'self-conscious Greek in Persia', which are considered here to be important for our ongoing discussion on 'Foucault in Iran' and

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which is now presented in conclusion, by embedding it in Foucault's history of sexuality and posing it against his presumed 'mistake', as the previous chapters have shown was often claimed regarding his involvement in Iran events in 1978 and 1979.

Perhaps, we could start this open end to our short treatise with a Foucaultian-like premise: what 'we' are to do with Enlightenment depends on what (we think) Enlightenment has done to 'us' (cf. Deacon 2003:99). It also depends on how exactly do we understand 'who we are'. Conventionally, 'our' role (that is, the role of people such as Foucault, the role of people making a living on the work of people such as Foucault as well as Foucault's many readers) has been summed up in the attributes and activities assigned to the concept of the 'intellectual' (cf. Deacon 2003:99). As we have seen throughout this book, Foucault, his later development of *parrhesia* partially aside, was tremendously self-critical in his use and application of the concept of 'intellectual'.

At least, since the Enlightenment, but of course stretching as far back as Plato's comments on the 'philosopher king' intellectuals and the theories they have authored, have been taken to provide both 'governors' and 'governed' with a range of questions such as 'what is?', 'what do we know?', and 'what must we do?' Foucault's Iran expeditions did not fail in at least readdressing these questions and the possible answers that could be given to them. On the contrary, Foucault's texts of this period indicate that he was working on 'conceptualising modernity as a multivalent set of practices – some that reinforce power relations and some that resist them' (McCall 2013:27). He was not turning towards ethics leaving the notion of power behind.

So, 'what is?' The distinctive hallmark of the legacy of the Enlightenment is its division of reality into two branches, two absolute and incommensurable universes, each with their own laws, conceived as totally discrete realities, forever divorced, alienated and estranged from one another: mind and matter, Self and world, the private and the public, the individual and the masses, the thinker and the thought, dream and reality, soul things

and worldly things, imagination and reason, West and East, subject and object, and Self and Other. This binary fiction of modern convenience has been broken down over the past decades, even if the de(con)structionists of modernity are themselves still very much ambivalent about the direction it is taking.

'Postmodernity', in all its awkwardness, has recognised over the past decades the damage caused to the Other by these modern polarisations. However, this postmodern recognition has gone no further than either merely emphasising the difference, or lingering in the difference, still keeping Self and Other apart, or otherwise completely demolishing otherness by forcing the Self to relinquish itself into integration with the Other. Now, in terms of the relation between Self and Other, there is in the wake of the critique of modernity, one of the three possible directions are to be taken: either the Other's otherness could be acknowledged according to modernity's strict polarising terms, whereby its otherness would be honoured whilst the Self's sense of sameness would not be disturbed; or, the Other's otherness could either be exalted or downplayed to such an extent that it is no longer possible to distinguish between Self and Other (which in the end, ironically, boils down to the extermination of the Other); or, and here, in what possibly could be described as the move after postmodernity, or 'post-postmodernity', where Foucault is to be found – there could be a conscious move to interrupt *both* the sense of Self and Other, by the Self *hesitantly* moving towards the Other, with all the uncertainty it entails, not knowing what it would bring about, keeping the tension alive, keeping both Self and Other in a 'strained, painful negative-dialectical position, producing, even if only momentarily, flashes of insight about the Other as an Other Self' (Beukes 2009b:8).

Foucault has been indeed read alongside Adorno as a 'post-postmodern' thinker who (Beukes 1996:246–249; 2009b):

[W]as willing to recognise Sameness in the Self-posed Other, who, when gazing 'East', saw not only difference but sameness, who was consciously willing to dwell over into the strained domain of the Other by severely compromising his acute sense of Self. (p. 10)

Along the very same lines, it could be argued that Foucault's critique of the (modern) events in Iran was by no means triumphant or sure of itself. His Iran writings form a robust awareness of loss, of a decadence which (now) must be fought, of a world in a state of collapse and of a still undefined future. Foucault trod the streets of Tehran as a self-conscious Greek in Persia, upholding a sense of necessity of the downfall of modern Western *telos*, which seemed to him almost like fate. Nietzsche's scorn for modern ideas made a profound impression on him – what Nietzsche ([1886] 1968) said about his own critique of modernity in *Beyond Good and Evil*, still rang true for Foucault's project in Iran:

[M]y book is a criticism of modernity, yet painfully it embraces the modern sciences, arts, even politics, together with possible indications that we are to reverse the fate of modern man [...]. (p. 225)

'*What do we know?*' It has been indicated that Foucault, during the last decade of his life, became progressively hesitant about a clear and specific philosophical inquiry into the strained dynamics of the relation between Self and Other. The main argument of Foucault's last fully completed and independent works, the second and third volumes of his series of *The History of Sexuality*, was that the leading exponents of 'sexual liberation' in the West could be as grandiose, oppressive and self-deceiving as the repressive Medieval and Victorian puritans they took pride in defying. The ideas of these self-appointed liberators could, as Foucault noted, be traced to the Freudian Marxism of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, but he regarded them as part of a far more significant problem, namely the 'problem of the West' itself.

Speaking in the 'high' Orient of Tokyo in April 1978, just before he went to the 'low' Orient of Iran in September 1978, Foucault (cited in Rée 2005) went so far as to suggest that the pretentious, false incantations of sexual liberation could be heard throughout the entire history of the West:

'We Europeans', Foucault said, then hastily correcting himself, 'We Others' – have been engaged for millennia in a quixotic adventure unparalleled in the rest of the world, namely an earnest quest for the

truth about ourselves in the form of the truth about our sexuality. Throughout the 20th century, moreover, we European Others have been regaling ourselves with a tale about how Freud eventually exploded the age-old hypocrisies, allowing sexuality to be released from its fetters at last: First, there was Greek and Roman antiquity, where sexuality was free and capable of expressing itself without hindrance; next, there was Christianity, which – for the first time in the history of the West – imposed a great prohibition on sexuality, saying no to pleasure and sex. But then, beginning in the 16th century, the bourgeoisie found itself in a situation [...] of economic domination and cultural hegemony; it took over the Christian rejection of sexuality and made it its own, enforcing it with unprecedented rigour and severity, and perpetuating it into the 19th century, until at last the veil began to be lifted by Freud. (p. 46)

To avoid misunderstandings with his Japanese audience, Foucault meticulously articulated his opinion that the Freudian-Marxist epic of sexual liberation was ‘misleading and untenable [...] for hundreds of reasons’ (Rée 2005:46).

However, in *The History of Sexuality* itself, Foucault presented his readers with a compilation of somewhat awkward case studies, ranging from the *ars erotic* practices of ancient cultures to lengthy elaborations on his views on perversity, leaving his readers to draw their own conclusions. His aim, and on that he was unequivocal and explicit (Foucault 1999:110–114), was not to replace old certainties with new ones but merely to aid his readers to formulate some uncertainties of their own, and then as radiantly tentative as possible. When Foucault’s Japanese hosts thanked him for the clarity of his exposition, he returned the compliment gracefully: ‘[o]bscurity is unforgivable; indeed it is a form of despotism’ (Foucault, in Rée 2005:46).

However, he immediately stated, he had to admit that his own elucidations sometimes had the effect of *cafouillage*, of messing things up and leaving them more confused than ever. But at least he could never be accused of false or factitious clarity. Foucault never emulated the kind of modernist Freudianism that confidently discovers ‘vast unconscious realities’ behind the smokescreen of false consciousness in which the rest of Westerners live their lives – nor did he long for the Marxist self-

assurance that ridicules a problematic political present in the light of a glorious future that has not yet dawned on anybody else outside the scope of a little circle in Europe. Foucault's mind was too expansive for that: he was never going to commit to a *a priori* separations between those who 'know' and those who 'do not know'. The mature Foucault of Eric Paras' *Collège de France* reception, for example, moved beyond those simplistic divisions and simply wanted to manifest *uncertainty* (Paras 2006:57–58).

Uncertainty is freedom, and the highest freedom is the freedom that allows 'us moderns' to be uncertain. Foucault, through his political-spiritual understanding of the modern world as a world without spirit, offered along this line a cross-cultural normative perspective in Iran during the events of 1978. So, what did Foucault know? He knew that 'we Western Others' have to change our concepts of Self and Other to make sense of the culturally pluralist world 'we' find ourselves in.

'*What must we do?*' Foucault's hesitance about critical matters in Iran in 1978 and 1979 was, therefore, not a careless negation of intellectual responsibility, but rather a principled avoidance of the arrogance of those who claim to speak with authority on matters 'we Western Others' should rather be silent about. Like Nietzsche before him, Foucault, towards the end of his life, learned to be quiet sometimes so that he could learn to talk, to be silent in the right way, to recover from himself and to make it possible for others to live with him. That was Foucault's 'mistake' in Iran: he dared to cross over, he dared to speak when others were silent, he dared to be silent when others were speaking, he dared to be hesitant and unclear when Western liberal commentators thought they could clearly and fluently articulate the problematic events in Iran. Foucault dared not speak – neither the trusted old binary language of modernity nor the pretentious, all-abiding, all-inclusive tongue of its postmodernist counterpart.<sup>78</sup>

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78. Section 'An ethics of self-discomfort' of Chapter 10 represents a substantial reworking of Beukes (2009b:10–11). This article was published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence, according to which permission is granted for reworking.

Perhaps then, the humbling lesson to be learned from Foucault's problematic expedition to Iran in 1978 could be that 'intellectuals' have to be silent sometimes, to learn to speak. And when they speak, they should do so cautiously, consistently interrupting themselves. More globally, the West has to learn anew to embrace understatement when faced with its Other. Our world would be a singularly different place if there was more hesitation in the Self's relation to the Other, more uncertainty in the West's dealing or rather reckoning with the 'East', if there was a greater sense of self-interruption of its Occident certainties, if self-discomfort could become a trait of its panoptic gaze on its Orient Other.

## ■ Foucault in Iran: Ten tentative answers

The modest hypothesis of this book, as mentioned in the Introduction, is that Foucault did not make a mistake by going to Iran in 1978, clearly supporting and willingly interpreting the unfolding revolution – yet only as long as this hypothesis is tested from Foucault's own theoretical framework; and that he did not make any mistakes whilst being *in* Iran, as long as that framework (especially regarding his philosophical understanding of political spirituality and Otherness, the 'Other as Self') is kept in mind. In the last part of the Introduction, 10 direct questions were presented, by which the validity of this hypothesis could now be addressed in terms of offering 10 uncomplicated, tentative and open-ended answers to those straightforward questions posed.

## ■ Did Foucault explicitly support the cause of the revolting masses in Iran in 1978 on modern-critical grounds?

At the centre of all considerations, Foucault did explicitly support the cause of the revolting masses in Iran in 1978, on



relatable philosophical grounds. It has been shown convincingly that Foucault viewed the events, already in the early stages of the Iran revolution, as inherently modern-critical, and very perceptively so. He resolutely held the opinion that these events could broaden and support the ongoing critique of modernity in Europe itself. He, as a result of this, went entirely against the grain of the conventional European perspective on and reception of the revolution which considered it to be regressive and a free-fall back into pre-modernity. The majority of Foucault's reports for *Corriere Della Sera* in 1978, of which many paragraphs have been cited and discussed in the preceding chapters, are quite obviously closely related to his general theoretical writings on the discourses of power, political spirituality, Otherness as well as the inherent risks of modernity. It is clear that these writings were stylistically unique – they indeed were not philosophical essays; however, by their decisive modern-critical claims, they were philosophical contributions to his oeuvre, in particular, and his critique of the project of modernity, in general. At no stage was Foucault 'seduced' by Islamism or any other 'Oriental' ideology – *contra* interpretations which reduce Foucault's involvement in Japan in the first half of 1978 and Iran in the second half of 1978 to precisely that. Furthermore, Foucault did espouse a unique kind of Orientalism in his Iran writings, but this Orientalism was deliberate – and could certainly not be regarded as a pedantic gaze from a prolific Occident on an inferior Orient. Lastly, it is true that Foucault was not consistent enough in cross-referencing from his theoretical work in France at the time to the events in Iran, and vice versa. The theoretical tenets of his Iran writings did not sufficiently find their way back to his lectures and publications after February 1979. But why was Foucault under any obligation to do it, in any case? To satisfy the many modernist methodologists of philosophy, who understand philosophy but not how philosophy *works*? Indeed, for Foucault, philosophy *functions* as a present history and as an articulation of changing object-subject relations – that is, a political spirituality.

## ■ **Did Foucault foresee Khomeini's understanding and implementation of what an 'Islamic Republic' would be, and did he at any point in his career endorse that understanding and application, even implicitly?**

It has been argued extensively that Foucault did not and *could not* foresee the character of the eventualised 1979 Islamic republic nor did he endorse Khomeini's understanding and application of what that 'Islamic republic' would be. What Foucault understood to be an Islamic government corresponded with what he got to know as the 'Iranian dream', which was tightly knit with his understanding of Shia Islam's non-hierarchical nature and his perspective on Khomeini as a non-political figure in the modern sense. He was convinced that the new dispensation would be anti-hierarchical along the lines of horizontal clergy organisation in Shia Islam. In hindsight, this conviction was possibly naive, as many of his critics at the time held, but naïveté surely does not amount to 'folly' or a 'gigantic mistake?'

## ■ **Was Foucault justifiably being held accountable by his critics in France for a naive perspective on the vicious potential embedded in any religious fundamentalism?**

It has been indicated over the course of nine chapters, as unbiased and balanced as possible, that Foucault was ferociously held accountable by his critics in France for what they considered a misdirected interpretation of the vicious potentiality embedded in any religious fundamentalism, on what they considered reasonable and justifiable grounds. This is an undeniable fact: Foucault indeed misread the developments from February 1979 onwards and did not foresee the bloodshed that would follow. Yet, how could he have predicted it? He was a philosopher after all, and not a prophet. There is no other responsible way than to acknowledge that

Foucault misjudged what was to follow after November 1978, but it is neither reasonable nor responsible to accuse Foucault of 'endorsing Khomeini' and 'championing Khomeini's version' of an Islamic republic. Whilst Foucault's Iran writings clearly point towards his unreserved endorsement of the revolution (yet endorsing rather the 'act of revolt' rather than the actual revolution itself), these texts do not support the notion of Foucault advocating Khomeini as a 'politician'— nor did he at any point of what was left of his career explicitly or implicitly ratify Khomeini's bloodthirsty regime; quite the opposite.

### ■ **Did Foucault have clear objectives for his journalistic expedition to Iran, and if he did not, then why should that be a problem philosophically?**

Foucault quite evidently had no definite or particular objectives for his expedition to Iran. In fact, he was to an extent unsure of what to make of the opportunity and eventually opted to use the events as an opportunity to write a history of the present, as history-as-it-unfolds. He was critically aware of the fact that he had no clear philosophical objective, in the conventional sense. Philosophically, he was out of place and uncomfortable. However, his uncertainty should be interpreted as essentially productive in a context where *hesitation* in the Self's relation to the Other is the hermeneutic key – and not 'certainty' nor 'confidence'. Foucault was conscious about the fact that 'he did not understand' and was self-conscious enough not to consider that 'uncertainty' a philosophical deficiency. To be uncertain is a philosophical virtue and not a vice.

### ■ **Did Foucault appreciate the unfolding of revolution in Iran on strictly philosophical grounds?**

Indeed – as has been shown consistently, Foucault appreciated, on an austere philosophical level, the spontaneous eruption of

resistance to established power and the way the dissemination of information assisted momentum of the Iran revolution.

### ■ **Was Foucault primarily fascinated by the violent confrontation with identity he had witnessed in Iran?**

Undeniably so – Foucault was spellbound by the fierce opposition to identity he observed in the streets of Tehran, and the irrationality unleashed by people willing to risk death for something the outcome of which they themselves did not yet understand. Although that was not the only factor contributing to his captivation by the events, it could possibly be isolated as the primary factor.

### ■ **Was Foucault intrigued by the possibility of a political alternative posed by the Iranian revolution?**

It has been argued in the previous chapters that Foucault was profoundly enthralled by the prospect of a political alternative, the *possibility* of an event that was completely other to liberal democracy. He was titillated by the nature of the political spirituality that he was convinced was sustaining this alternative – that the revolution designated for him a radically new set of subject-object relations to be formed, precisely from within a modernised context.

### ■ **Did Foucault compromise his philosophical position and reputation by not engaging in the legitimate critique of subjects who were systematically crushed as the revolution unfolded?**

Yes, he unfortunately did compromise his reputation in this regard: Foucault, by initially furthering what he considered to be the fundamental cause and objective of the revolution – ‘getting rid of what was modern in Iran’ – and in his belief that secularists

would not be marginalised in the new dispensation, compromised his philosophical position by not engaging the appropriate criticism of people who were methodically destroyed as the revolution unfolded: women, ‘homosexuals’ and political dissidents (meaning, steadfast secular Iranians), in particular. Yet again, does ‘compromise’ amount to a ‘gigantic mistake, similar to Heidegger’s flirtation with National Socialism’, ‘an error to be confessed’ or ‘a farcical self-absorption?’ Of course, not.

### ■ **Did Foucault underestimate the hostility with which his reports would be received?**

Yes, and he was taken aback by it: Foucault quite strikingly misjudged the antagonism with which his Iran writings were received, back in France, in particular – initially not reacting to his critics at all, then being entirely defensive, eventually withdrawing altogether from the circle of interpretation. In this sense, Foucault made any later answers to his decriers very vulnerable.

### ■ **Did Foucault’s decision to go to Iran and report on the revolution in the end harm his reputation as being the leading intellectual in France and a world-renowned philosopher at the time?**

That is unfortunately the case: maintaining the grunt of this book’s hypothesis that Foucault going to Iran was not a mistake and nothing in his writings from the period point to a ‘mistake’, it must be conceded that his unwillingness to address legitimate points of concern did, in the end, undermine not only his reputation but his well-being. Foucault’s reporting expedition, unfortunately, did injure his standing as possibly the most eminent philosopher in Europe in the 1970s and sequestered him, to a considerable extent, from the European scholarly civic and the Western liberal tradition, where he was previously venerated.

It scarred him on a personal level, as confirmed by the miserable eulogies at his funeral (cf. Eribon 1992:289; Macey 2004:128).

## ■ The spirit of a world without spirit

These answers are, of course, preliminary and have only the intention to stimulate ongoing discussion on what has in the opening chapters been referred to as ‘an open nerve in Foucault scholarship’. They nevertheless reflect the author’s attempts to rework the most recent attempts in the scholarship to make sense of it all. However, it would be preposterous to ‘answer on behalf of Foucault’, as much as he considered himself ‘speaking on behalf of Others’ and being a ‘prophet of some kind’, to be extremely problematic in a philosophical sense. That is why it is, in this open-ended closure, sensible to create a dialogical space in which Foucault in his absence could answer similar straight questions on his presence in and writings from Iran – as he did in the only extensive interview he was willing to do on this matter after February 1979 (Foucault 1988a:211–224). This interview with Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet, conducted after April 1979 when the bloodshed by Khomeini’s *komitehs* in Iran became an overwhelmingly clear fact, originally appeared in the two philosophers’ own work on Iranian revolution (Brière & Pierre 1979:227–241). In the discussion *infra*, the many biographical references, anecdotes and rhetoric elements in the two interviewers’ questions to Foucault are restricted to the bare minimum, and Foucault’s answers positioned to supply the essence of his arguments in each case and question.

In this interview, Foucault, again without hesitation, commended the Iranian revolution as an excellent example of the manifestation of a ‘collective will’ that could not be thought of as stemming from (Marxist) categories such as class struggle or economic oppression. For the revolution to be politically effective, Foucault in this exceptional interview stresses that the Shia opposition to the Shah had to involve *political spirituality*, that radical Foucaultian reconfiguration of object–subject relations and a

resulting transformation in the subjectivity of a collective. The spiritual politics of Islam in 1978 enabled this change to take place - ironising the Marxist axiom that religion forms 'the spirit of a world without spirit'.

The dialogue of the interview follows:

**Question (Q):** 'Why were so many people, including yourself, fascinated by what has happened in Iran over the last year?'

**Foucault (F):** 'I would like to go back to another, perhaps less important question, yet one that may provide a way for me to directly answer your question, namely what is it about what has happened in Iran that a whole lot of people, on the Left and on the Right, find so irritating?<sup>79</sup> The Iran affair and the way in which it has taken place have not aroused the same kind of untroubled sympathy as for Portugal, for example, or for Nicaragua. I'm not saying that Nicaragua aroused a great deal of interest, but in the case of Iran, in Europe I soon felt a small, epidermic reaction what was definitely not one of immediate sympathy. For example: a well-known French journalist wrote an article in Tehran that was published in Paris and, in the last sentence in which she spoke of the "Islamic revolt," she found that the adjective "fanatic," which she had certainly not written, had been crudely added to her report. This strikes me as being fairly typical of the irritations that the Iranian movement has provoked. So, to answer your question: I don't think that so many people were fascinated by what happened in Iran, but rather irritated by it.'

**Q.:** 'People are undoubtedly irritated by what has happened in Iran, but why? Is it possible that the many different attitudes to Iran play a role in this "irritation?" For example, there's the attitude of the classic, orthodox, extreme Left, above all the Communist league, which supports Iran and then the whole of the extreme Left, various Marxist-Leninist groups, which all say basically the same thing: Yes, the demonstrators in Iran are religious rebels, but that doesn't really matter. Religion is after all only a shield. Therefore, we can support them unhesitatingly. We can thus support these religious rebels, but only from the perspective that the struggle in Iran is a classic anti-imperialist struggle, like that in Vietnam, in this case incidentally

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79. It is significant that Foucault immediately relays the reference to a 'fascination' to a polemic notion, namely the 'irritation' of his critics back in France at the time.

led by a religious man, Khomeini, yet one who might quite as well be a Marxist-Leninist. On the other hand, the attitude of the more moderate Left is one of irritation from the outset. These moderates say more or less two things: Firstly, religion is the veil for an archaism, a regression at least as far as women are concerned. Secondly, which cannot be denied, because one almost intuitively feels it: If ever and whenever religious forces come to power and apply their program, should we not spontaneously fear a new dictatorship?’

**F.:** ‘It is, of course, a legitimate question, but it might be said that behind these two irritations, that of the extreme Left and that of the moderate Left, there is another irritation, or perhaps an astonishment, a sort of unease when confronted by a phenomenon that is, for the European political mentality, very curious. It is a phenomenon that may be called “revolutionary” in the very broad sense of the term, since it concerns the uprising of a whole nation against a power that oppresses it. Now we normally recognise a “revolution” when we can observe two dynamics: the first is that of social confrontations and the second involves a political dynamics, that is to say, the presence of a vanguard, class, party or political ideology; in short, a spearhead that carries the whole nation with it. It seems to me that in what is happening in Iran, one can recognise neither of those two dynamics that are for us Europeans distinctive signs and explicit marks of a revolutionary phenomenon. What, for us, is a revolutionary movement in which one cannot situate the internal contradictions of a society and in which one cannot point out a vanguard either? The answer to this question is to be found in the revolutionary movement in Iran. What is spontaneously feared is not a new dictatorship, but a revolution that does not conform to European norms and expectations.’

**Q.:** ‘This could be seen at Tehran University, where there were Marxists who all were very conscious of living through what they considered to be a “fantastic revolution.” It was evidently much more than they had imagined, hoped for, dreamt for and dreamt about. Invariably, when asked what they thought, these young Marxists replied: “It is a revolutionary situation, but there’s no vanguard.” The reaction one hears most often about Iran from within Iran, is that people outside Iran “don’t understand.” When a movement is called “revolutionary,” people in the West always have this modernist notion of progress, of something that is about to be transformed in the direction of inevitable progress. This notion of progress is put into question by the religious phenomenon in Iran. Indeed, the wave of religious confrontation is based on notions that go back for thirteen centuries.



It is with these historical notions that the Shah has been challenged, whilst, at the same time, the Iranians claim social justice, which seems to be in line with progressive thought or action. The Iranians themselves are swimming or perhaps drowning in this ambiguity and one is able to isolate several levels of language, commitment and expression in this regard. There is, for example, the man who says, "Long live Khomeini," who is sincerely convinced about his religion; the man who says "long live Khomeini," but "I'm not particularly religious, Khomeini is just a symbol"; the man who says "Yes, I'm fairly religious, I like Khomeini, but I prefer Sharnat Madari," who is a very different kind of figure than Khomeini. There is the woman who puts on the chador to show that she is against the Shah's regime; and there is another woman, partly secularised, partly Muslim, who doesn't put on the veil, but who will also say "I'm a Muslim and long live Khomeini." Among all these people there are different levels of thought. And yet everybody shouts, at one and the same time, with great enthusiasm, "Long live Khomeini!" - and all these different levels of language and commitment seem to fall away. So, when you were in Iran, were you able to determine and to grasp the ambivalent nature of this enormous religious confrontation?

**F.:** 'Perhaps, I could refer to Francois Furet's book on the French revolution. It is a very intelligent book and it might help us to sort out this ambivalence. Furet draws a distinction between the totality of the processes of economic and social transformation that began well before the revolution of 1789 and ended well after it, and the specificity of that revolutionary event: that is to say, the specificity of what people experienced deep inside, but also of what they experienced in that sort of theatre that they put together from day to day and which constituted the eventual revolution. I wonder whether this distinction might not be applied at least to some extent to Iran. It is true that Iranian society is shot through with contradictions and ambivalences that cannot in any way be denied, but it is certain that the revolutionary event that has been taking place for more than a year now, and which is at the same time an inner experience, a sort of constantly recommenced liturgy, a community experience, and so on: All that is certainly articulated onto the class struggle, but which doesn't find expression in an immediate, transparent way. So, my answer to you, yet in the form of a question is: What role has religion then, with the clearly formidable grip that it has on people, the position that it has always held in relation to political power, its content, which makes it a religion of combat and sacrifice, and so on? It is definitely not the role of an ideology which would help to mask

ambivalences or form a sort of sacred union between a great many divergent interests. The revolt in Iran really has been the vocabulary, the ceremonial, the timeless drama into which one could fit the historical drama of a people that pitted its very existence against that of its sovereign.'

**Q.:** 'What was striking was the uprising of literally a whole population. If one considers, for example, the demonstration of Ashura, and leave young children, the disabled, the old and the small proportion of women who stayed at home aside, it is clear that the whole of Tehran was in the streets shouting "Death to the king!", except of course those parasites who literally lived off the regime. Even people who were associated with the regime for a very long time and who stood for a constitutional monarchy as little as a month before, were likewise shouting "Death to the king!" It was an astonishing, unique moment and one that must remain. Obviously, afterwards, things will settle down and different strata, different classes will become visible. How does one explain the collective will that supplied the impetus for the involvement of a whole population?'

**F.:** 'Indeed, among the things that characterised this revolutionary event, is the fact that it has brought out - and very few peoples in history have experienced this - an absolutely collective will. Of course, on the one hand, this "collective will" is a political myth with which jurists and philosophers try to analyse or to justify institutions. It is in that sense simply a theoretical tool: Nobody has ever seen the "collective will" and, personally, I always thought that the collective will was like God or like the soul, something one thought one would never encounter. Yet in Tehran and throughout Iran, I have met the collective will of a people, not as a theoretical tool, but as a transformative dynamic. Well, and you have to salute it, that doesn't happen every day. Furthermore (and here one can indeed speak of Khomeini's "political sense"), this collective will was given one object and one target only, namely the departure of the Shah. This collective will, which in our theories is always general, has found for itself in Iran an absolutely clear, particular aim: and has in this way erupted into history. Of course, in the independence struggles and in the anti-colonial wars, one encounters similar phenomena. Yet, in Iran the national sentiment has been more vigorous than in those struggles: The rejection of submission to foreigners, disgust at the looting of national resources, the rejection of a dependent foreign policy, American interference, which was visible everywhere, have all been determinants in the Shah being perceived as a Western agent.'

But national feeling has, in my opinion, been only one of the elements of a still more radical rejection: the rejection by a people, not only of foreigners, but of everything that had constituted, for years, for centuries, its political destiny.'

**Q.:** 'Perhaps one could in this regard refer back to China in 1967, at the height of the Lin Piao period: one could at the time observe the same type of collective will. Something very powerful was taking place, a very deep desire on the part of the whole Chinese people; for example, concerning the relationship between town and country, intellectuals and manual workers, that is to say, about all those questions that have now been settled in China in the usual, traditional way. In Peking, the Chinese were forming a people "in fusion." Yet afterwards, the realisation that both Western commentators and the Chinese have been duped, was inescapable. Perhaps, it is true that we duped ourselves in believing in the existence of such a collective will. Perhaps that is why Western commentators now hesitate to allow themselves to be carried away by the revolutionary events in Iran. In any case, there is something similar in the charisma of Mao and Khomeini - and something similar in the way the young Islamic militants speak of Khomeini and the way the Red Guards spoke of Mao. Would you agree that the experience in China might have had a sobering effect on Western observers commenting on a revolution in the East?'

**F.:** 'All the same, the Cultural Revolution in China was certainly presented as a struggle between certain elements of the population and certain others, certain elements in the party and certain others, or between the population and the party, to name a few possibilities. Iran was different than China because what struck me in Iran was that there was no struggle between these possible different elements. What gave Iran such beauty, and at the same time such gravity, is that there was only one confrontation: between the entire people and the state threatening it with its weapons and police. One didn't have to go to extremes to observe it; one found them there at once, on the one side, the entire will of the people, on the other the machine guns. The people demonstrated, the tanks arrived. The demonstrations were repeated, and the machine guns fired yet again. And this occurred in an almost identical way, with, of course, an intensification each time, but without any change of form or nature. It was the repetition of the demonstration that was crucial. The readers of Western newspapers must have tired of it fairly soon. Oh, another demonstration in Iran! But I believe the demonstrations in Iran, in its very repetition, had

an intense political meaning. The very word “demonstration” must be taken literally: a people was tirelessly demonstrating its will. Of course, it was not only because of the demonstration that the Shah left. But one cannot deny that it was because of an *endlessly demonstrated rejection* of the Shah that he eventually left Iran. There was in these demonstrations a link between the collective action, the religious ritual and the expression of public right. It’s rather like in Greek tragedy, where the collective ceremony and the re-enactment of the principles of right go hand in hand. In the streets of Tehran, there was an act, a political and juridical act, carried out collectively within religious rituals – namely an act of deposing the sovereign.’

**Q.:** ‘Again on the question of the collective will, what was striking was when the students came forward and said: “We are all the same, we are all one, we are all for the Koran, we are all Muslims, there is no difference between us. Make sure you write that, that we’re all the same.” Yet everyone knew perfectly well that there were differences, for example, that the intellectuals, a section of the bazaaris and the middle classes were afraid to go too far. And yet they followed. Could you explain that?’

**F.:** ‘There is a very remarkable fact in what is happening in Iran. There was a government that was certainly one of the best in terms of weaponry; the best in terms of a large army that was astonishingly faithful, compared with what one might think otherwise; and a police force that was certainly not very efficient, but whose violence and cruelty often made up for its lack of subtlety. It was, moreover, a regime directly supported by the United States. It had the backing of the whole world, of the countries large and small that surrounded it. In a sense, the Shah’s regime had everything going for it, plus, of course, oil, which guaranteed the state of an income that it could use as it wished. Yet, despite all this, a people rose up in revolt: It rose up in a context of crisis and economic difficulties, but the economic difficulties in Iran at that time were not sufficiently great for people not to take to the streets, in their hundreds of thousands, in their millions, and to face machine guns bare-chested. That’s the phenomenon that we really have to talk about.’

**Q.:** ‘In comparative terms, may it be that our own economic difficulties are greater than those in Iran at the time?’

**F.:** ‘Perhaps. Yet, whatever the economic difficulties, we still have to explain why there were people who rose up and said: *we’re not*

*having any more of this.* In rising up, the Iranians said to themselves – and this perhaps is the soul of the uprising: Of course, we have to change this regime and get rid of this man, we have to change this corrupt administration, we have to change the whole country, the political organisation, the economic system, the foreign policy. But, above all, we have to change ourselves. Our way of being, our relationship with others, with things, with eternity, with God, must be completely changed and there will only be a true revolution if this radical change in our experience takes place. I believe that it is here that Islam played a crucial role. It may be that one or other of its obligations, one or other of its codes exerted a certain fascination. But, above all, in relation to the way of life that was theirs, religion for them was like the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity. Shi'ism is precisely a form of Islam that, with its teaching and esoteric content, distinguishes between what is mere external obedience to the code and what is the profound spiritual life. When I say that they were looking to Islam for “changing their subjectivity,” this is quite compatible with the fact that traditional Islamic practice was already there and already gave them their identity. In this way they had of living the Islamic religion as a revolutionary force, there was something other than the desire to obey the law more faithfully: there was precisely the desire to renew their entire existence by going back to a spiritual experience that they thought they could find within Shia Islam itself. People always quote Marx on “religion as the opium of the people.” The sentence that immediately preceded that statement and which is somehow never quoted says that religion is *the spirit of a world without spirit*. Let's say, then, that Islam, in that year of 1978, was not the opium of the people, precisely because it was *the spirit of a world without spirit*.'

**Q.:** 'By way of illustrating what you just said – “A demonstration in Iran really is a demonstration” – could we possibly use the word “witness”? – In the sense that, with the Shah out of the way, the movement will necessarily split apart?'

**F.:** 'Of course, there will come a moment when the phenomenon that we are trying to apprehend and which has so fascinated us and yet irritated so many – the revolutionary experience itself – will die out. There was literally a light that lit up in all of the demonstrators and which bathed all of them at the same time. That will die out. At that point, different political forces, different tendencies will appear, there will be compromises, there will be this or that, I have

no idea who will come out on top and I don't think there are many people who can say now. It *will* disappear though. There will be processes at another level, another reality in a way. What I mean is that what we witnessed in Iran was not the result of an alliance, for example, between various political groups. Nor was it the result of a compromise between social classes that, in the end, each giving into the other on this or that, came to an agreement to claim this or that thing. Not at all. Something quite different has happened. A phenomenon has traversed the entire people and will one day stop. At that moment, all that will remain are different political calculations that each individual had had in his or her head the whole time. Let's take the activist in some political group as an example. When he was taking part in one of those demonstrations, he was double: he had his political calculation, which was this or that, and at the same time he was an individual caught up in that revolutionary movement, or rather an Iranian who had risen up against his king. And the two things did not come into contact, he did not rise up against his king because his party had made this or that calculation.'

**Q.:** 'One of the significant examples of this movement is what has happened in the case of the Kurds. The Kurds, a majority of whom are Sunnis, and whose autonomist tendencies have long been known, have used the language of this uprising. Everybody thought they would be against it, whilst they have supported it, saying: "Of course we are Sunnis, but above all we are Muslims." When people spoke to them of their Kurdish specificity, their reaction was almost one of anger, or rejection. "What! We are Kurds!" they replied to you in Kurdish and the interpreter had to translate from Kurdish, "No, not at all, we are Iranians above all, and we share all the problems of Iran, we want the king to go." The slogans in Kurdistan were exactly the same as those in Tehran or Mashad: "Long live Khomeini" and "Death to the Shah." What do we make of the radical inclusiveness of the revolt?'

**F.:** 'I knew some Iranians in Paris, and what struck me about a lot of them was their fear: Fear that it would be known that they were consorting with Left-wing people, fear that the agents of some observing state department might learn that they were reading this or that book, and so on. It was exactly the opposite in Iran. When I arrived in Tehran, immediately after the September massacres, I said to myself that I was going to find a terrorised city, because there had been around four thousand dead. Now I can't say that I found happy people, but there was an absence of fear and an intensity of courage, or rather, the intensity that people are capable of when danger, though still

not removed, had already been transcended. In their revolution they had already transcended the danger posed by the machine gun that constantly faced all of them. It was this fearlessness that brought them all together in Iran, whether Kurd or Shi'ite.'

**Q.:** 'Yes, but were the Kurds still with the Shi'ites? Was the National Front still with the religious? Was the intelligentsia still following Khomeini? If there are twenty thousand dead and the army reacts, if there's a civil war lurking below the surface or an authoritarian Islamic Republic on the horizon, there is a risk that we will see some curious swings to the back. It will be said, for example, that Khomeini forced the hand of the National Front. It will be said that Khomeini did not wish to respect the wishes of the middle classes and intelligentsia for compromise. All these things are either true or false, not so?'

**F.:** 'Actually, it will be true and, at the same time, not true. The other day, someone said to me: Everything you think about Iran isn't true, and you don't realise that there are communists everywhere. But I do know this. I know that in fact there are a lot of people who belong to communist or Marxist-Leninist organisations - there is no denying that. But what I liked about writings as your own was that they didn't try to break up this phenomenon into its constituent elements; they tried to leave it as a single beam of light, even though we know that it is made up of several beams. That's both the risk and the interest in talking about Iran.'

**Q.:** 'One evening, we went out after the curfew with a very Westernised, 40-year-old woman, who had previously lived in London and was now living in a house in northern Tehran. She came to where we were living, in a working-class district. Shots were being fired on every side. We took her into the backstreets, to see the army, to see the ordinary people, the shouts from the rooftops. It was the first time she had been in that district on foot. It was the first time she had spoken with such ordinary people, people who cried out "Allah Akbar!" ("God is great!"). She was completely overcome, embarrassed that she was not wearing a chador, not because she was afraid that someone might throw vitriol in her face, but because she wanted to be like the other women. It wasn't so much the episode of the chador that is important, but what those people said to us. They spoke in a very religious way and always said at the end: "May God keep you" and other such religious expressions. She replied in the same way, with the same language. She said to us: "This is the first time I have ever spoken like that." She was very moved.'

**F.:** ‘Yet, one day, all this will become, for historians, a rallying of the upper classes to a popular Left-wing movement. That will be an “analytical truth.” I believe it is one of the reasons why one feels a certain unease when one comes back from Iran and people, wanting to understand, ask one for an analytical schema of an already constituted reality.’

**Q.:** ‘Another interpretative grid that we Western journalists have often had comes to mind. This movement has followed such an odd logic that, on several occasions, Western observers have ignored it; for example, the day of the National Front strike in November, which had been a failure; or the fortieth day of mourning of Black Friday, which had been terrible. One could imagine how the fortieth day of mourning would be very moving, very painful. Now, on the fortieth day, many shops were reopened, and people didn’t seem particularly sad. Yet the movement began again with its own logic, its own rhythm, its own breathing. It seemed that in Iran, despite the hectic rhythm at Tehran, the movement followed a rhythm that might be compared with that of a man – they walked like a single man – who breathes, gets tired, gets his breath back, resumes the attack, but really with a collective rhythm. On that fortieth day of mourning, there was no great demonstration of mourning. After the massacre in Jaleh Square on Friday 08 September 1978, the Iranians were getting their breath back. The movement was relaunched by the astonishing contagion of the strikes that began about that time. Then there was the start of the new academic year, the angry reaction of the Tehran population, which set fire to Western symbols. What is your reaction to this, what for us Westerners may seem an oddity?’

**F.:** ‘Well, another thing that struck me as “odd” was the way the “weapon of oil” was used. If there was one immediately sensitive spot, it was oil, which was both the cause of the evil and the absolute weapon. One day we may know what happened. It certainly seems that the strike and its tactics had not been calculated in advance. On the spot, without their being any order coming from above, at a given moment, the workers went on strike, coordinating among themselves, from town to town, in an absolutely free way. Indeed, it wasn’t a strike in the strict sense of a cessation of work and an interruption of production. It was clearly the affirmation that the oil belonged to Iranian people and not to the Shah or to his clients or partners. It was at heart a strike in favour of national reappropriation.’

**Q.:** ‘Then, on the contrary, for it would not be honest to be silent about it, it must be said that when I, an individual, a foreign journalist,



a woman, was confronted by this “oneness,” this collective will, one could feel an extraordinary shock, mentally and physically. It was as if that oneness required that everyone conform to it. In a sense, it was woe betide anyone who did not conform. We all had problems of this kind in Iran. Hence, perhaps, the reticence that people often feel in Europe. An uprising is all very fine, yes, but the consequences?’

**F.:** ‘Yes, there were demonstrations, verbal at least, of violent anti-Semitism. There were demonstrations of xenophobia and directed not only at Americans but also at foreign workers who had come to work in Iran. That was problematic.’

**Q.:** ‘This is indeed the other side of the unity that certain people may find offensive. For example, once a photographer got punched in the face several times because he was thought to be an American. “No, I’m French,” he protested. The demonstrators then embraced him and said: “Above all, don’t say anything about this in the press.” Of course, the demonstrators’ imperious demands come to mind as well: “Make sure you say that there were so many thousand victims, so many million demonstrators in the streets.” That is another problem: The problem of a different culture, a different attitude to the truth. Besides it’s part of the struggle. When your hands are empty, if you pile up the dead, real and imaginary, you ward off fear, and you become all the more convincing, not so?’

**F.:** ‘They don’t have the same regime of truth as ours, which, it has to be said, is very special, even if it has become almost universal. The Greeks had their own. The Arabs of the Maghreb have another. And in Iran it is largely modelled on a religion that has an exoteric form and an esoteric content. That is to say, everything that is said under the explicit form of the law also refers to another meaning. So not only is saying one thing that means another not a condemnable ambiguity, it is, on the contrary, a necessary and highly prized added level of meaning. It is often the case that people say something that, at the factual level, isn’t true, but which refers to another, deeper meaning, which cannot be assimilated in terms of precision and observation.’

**Q.:** ‘It does become a real problem when one is told over and over again that all minorities will be respected and when, at the same time, they clearly aren’t being respected. When people speak to you about Jews – it is true that there was a lot of anti-Semitic talk – that they will tolerate them only if they don’t support Israel and when anonymous notes are sent out, the credibility of the movement is

somewhat affected. It is the strength of the movement to be a single unity. As soon as it perceives slight differences, it feels threatened. So the intolerance is there - perhaps necessary?'

**F.:** 'What has given the Iranian movement its intensity has indeed been a double register. On the one hand, a collective will that has been very strongly expressed politically and, on the other hand, the desire for a radical change in ordinary life. But this double affirmation can only be based on traditions, institutions that carry a charge of chauvinism, nationalism, exclusiveness, which have a very powerful attraction for certain individuals. To confront so fearsome an armed power, one mustn't feel alone, nor begin with nothing.'

Apart from the problem of the immediate succession to the Shah, there is another question that interests me at least as much: Will this unitary movement, which, for a year now has stirred up a people faced with machine guns, have the strength to cross its own frontiers and go beyond the things on which, or a time, it has based itself? Are those limits, are those supports going to disappear once the initial enthusiasm wanes, or are they, on the contrary, going to take root and become stronger? Many here and some in Iran are waiting for and hoping for the moment when secularisation will at last come back to the fore and reveal the good, old type of revolution we Europeans have always known. I wonder how far the Iranians will be taken along this strange, unique road, in which they look for, against the stubbornness of their destiny and against everything they have been for centuries, "something quite different".



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*Foucault in Iran, 1978-1979*, by Johann Beukes, is a major contribution to the specialised field of Foucault research. It is an impressive, detailed in-depth study of the single brief event of Foucault's two short visits of nine and seven days, respectively, to Iran in 1978, intended as a journalistic covering of the Iranian revolution, the result of which appeared in 1979. However, the book analyses and interprets the full context of its wider philosophical and political ramifications and implications. The breadth and depth of Beukes' engagement with the primary and secondary literature concerning Foucault in general, and his Iran adventure in particular, are admirable. Equally convincing is his excellently informed situating of this in-itself small-scale event in the very wide context of the dynamic and multifarious post-enlightenment Western tradition of social thinking and the various faces of critique thereof. The author's style of academic engagement, his application of the morality of academic discourse, including historical evaluation, is exemplary. In his hands this type of interaction is not an exercise in aggressive destruction, but a constructive engagement, seeking fairness and balance. The book is deeply sympathetic *Motifforschung* as far as Foucault is concerned, taking a wide spectrum of relevant factors into consideration, and is a constructive alternative to the personal belittling of Foucault by the majority of his critics. This book moves beyond the limitations and implications of a conflictual style, opening the possibility of an open-ended never-final process instead of the final put-down and shut-down often sought in academic discourse. This does not mean that Beukes is blind to the shortcomings in Foucault's evaluation of the Iranian situation at the time of the revolution, but these are seen as serious yet understandable and explicable shortcomings, not as fatal flaws in academic and personal integrity. *Foucault in Iran, 1978-1979* appreciates the religious quality of the French philosopher's notion of 'political spirituality', and invites further reflection.

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The book guides the reader into the mysteries of Foucault's involvement and understanding of the Iranian revolution and its aftermath in 1978 to 1979. It moves away from the often too simplified interpretation of Foucault's involvement and writings during this period as a 'breathtaking mistake' and Beukes presents an alternative view based on an in depth understanding and correspondence of Foucault philosophy and positions on power, death, madness, uncertainty, spirituality, Orientalism and Otherness. Ten crucial questions about Foucault in Iran are asked very directly and answered in a well thought-through and researched way. These questions are: (1) Did Foucault explicitly support the cause of the revolting masses in Iran in 1978 on modern-critical grounds? (2) Did Foucault foresee Khomeini's understanding and implementation of what an 'Islamic Republic' should be and did he at any point of what was left of his career, endorse that understanding and application, even implicitly? (3) Was Foucault justifiably being held accountable by his critics in France for a naive perspective on the vicious potential embedded in any religious fundamentalism? (4) Did Foucault have clear objectives for his journalistic expedition to Iran and if he did not, why should that be a problem philosophically? (5) Did Foucault appreciate the unfolding revolution in Iran on strictly philosophical grounds? (6) Was Foucault primarily fascinated by the violent confrontation with identity he witnessed in Iran?

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