

## Foucault, Iran, and the Question of Religious Revolt

Foucault is rarely considered a thinker concerned with the question of political revolt: Questions concerning when and under what circumstances a given population might determine its lot unbearable, and when this collective judgment might be justifiable. Of course, this lack of attention to the question of revolution in Foucault reflects the very real fact that Foucault had little to say in his major published writings about the phenomenon of revolution. In part, this reflects Foucault's temperament: he has little to say about the topic of revolution because he is not interested in history on a grand scale. Although his texts do explore fundamental shifts in ideas, Foucault is no ordinary historian of ideas. Indeed, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault is harshly critical of the traditional historian who seeks after the security of continuities in historical explanation: Foucault's will be a history comprised of break, rupture, and discontinuity.<sup>1</sup>

On the face of it then it would seem that Foucault's disdain for theories of historical continuity would make him sympathetic to theorists investigating the nature of armed insurrection and its historical significance. However, if Foucault's allergy to historical continuity can ultimately be traced back to his suspicion of Hegelian and Marxian dialectical theories of history, then his suspicion of various attempts to explain history in revolutionary terms becomes comprehensible. In addition to being a philosopher who investigates historical rupture rather than historical continuity, Foucault is a philosopher who chooses to emphasize what he terms in *Discipline and Punish* the "microphysics of power" rather than its more spectacular manifestations.

Just as interpreters of Foucault's work have not known what to make of his glorification of the Iranian Revolution and the appearance of the category of revolution in his analyses, until

quite recently, scholars paid little attention to the place of religion in general and Christianity specifically in his writings. Although scholars have begun to make amends for this oversight by devoting interesting studies to the relationship between Foucault and Christian theology, generally interpretations of Foucault's work have thought it antithetical to religious discourse.

Given Foucault's very real aversion to revolutionary political theories and discourses and his general ambivalence with regards to religion, it is somewhat surprising to see Foucault explaining the Iranian Revolution in terms of these very theories and discourses, albeit with important differences. This paper re-examines what Foucault has to say about the revolutionary aspect of the Iranian Revolution in order to reconsider Foucault's reticence concerning political revolution in his published writings. I argue that as a result of his writings on the Iranian Revolution, the customary picture of Foucault as a historian unconcerned with the question of revolution will need to be reevaluated. How might we reconcile what Thomas Flynn calls Foucault's philosophy of history with the topics he investigates in his journalism? The first section of my paper examines the relationship between religion and critique in Foucault's later writings. I argue that Foucault's fascination with the Iranian Revolution stems at least in part from his interest in religion as a vehicle for critique in the West and for revolution in the Middle East. The second section examines the role that revolution plays in Foucault's writings on the Iranian Revolution and relates this back to themes of concern to Foucault during this period in his career. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of Afary and Anderson's criticism that Foucault misunderstood Islam and as a result oversimplified the situation in Iran and glorified the revolutionary zeal expressed by the masses led by the Ayatollah.

## **1. Religion, Critique, and the Aesthetics of Existence in Iran and the West**

According to Foucault, it was only once the Shah abdicated power early in 1979 and the people of Iran could take finally to the streets and the barricades that European political theorists could finally find something recognizable in this strange revolution. Prior to this point, one could draw certain parallels between European political history and the contemporary situation in Iran, but it is only in February of 1979 that what was occurring in Iran become recognizable according to familiar (i.e. Western) categories. Significantly, Foucault compares the situation in Iran prior to the Shah's removal from power with events from ecclesiastical history. In order to provide a familiar reference point for his readers, Foucault claims that the events in Iran can be understood in terms of the revolutionary religious movements of the early modern period:

In the mosques during the day, the mullahs spoke furiously against the shah, the Americans, and the West and its materialism. They called for people to fight against the entire regime in the name of the Quran and of Islam. When the mosques became too small for the crowd, loudspeakers were put in the streets. The voices, as terrible as must have been that of Savonarola in Florence, the voices of the Anabaptists in Münster, or those of the Presbyterians in at the time of Cromwell, resounded through the whole village, the whole neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

In a 1978 essay entitled "What is Critique?", Foucault describes these Western religious movements in terms of the idea of critique as well.<sup>3</sup> In this essay from 1978 (just several months prior to his texts on Iran), Foucault points out the essential ambiguities of religion relative to the questions of governmentality and critique. Understanding religious discourse is vital in order to understand modern subjectivity and the complicity between forms of religious subjectivization and the governance of life in late modern Western societies. But this complicity is only half the story, for various seventeenth century Protestant movements also played a critical role in contesting the rise of modern regimes of control. Ultimately, I believe it is the complexity of the relationship between religion and politics in the West that drew Foucault to events in Iran, and

events in Iran may have in turn led Foucault to rethink the role of religious discourse in the formation of modern subjectivity.

Foucault can no longer hold (provided he ever did) that religion is simply the realm of benighted superstition standing in the way of progress, nor can it be seen as simply restrictive ideological mask.<sup>4</sup> Religion both contributes to the production of certain forms of modern subjectivity and provides the means to critique these various forms of subjectivity. At various times and in various circumstances, religion has different meanings. In accordance with his historical nominalism and aversion to grand theory, Foucault attempts to look at the various social and political manifestations of religious sentiment, and it is here that one finds an essential source for Foucault's fascination with the events in Iran. The significance of these events for Foucault lies in the intersection between practices of spirituality and political institutions and the impact of this intersection.

Foucault saw the Shiite sect of Islam as opening a space for critique in Iranian society that could be understood as at least somewhat analogous to that of various Protestant movements in early modern Europe. He reports that within the context of Iranian society, Marx's famously dismissive dictum that "religion is the opiate of the people" makes no sense. If one takes seriously the idea, as Foucault evidently did, that religion can provide a critical function within society, then the idea that religion can only provide individuals with a convenient excuse from thinking tells at best only half the story. Still, one should not lose sight of the complexity of the phenomenon, for within a European context, religious practices were key in the emerging disciplines of governmentality. This is clear from the following passage:

The Christian pastoral, or the Christian church insofar as it deployed an activity that was precisely and specifically pastoral, developed this idea—unique, I believe, and completely foreign to ancient culture—that every individual, whatever his age or status, from the beginning to the end of his life and down to the very details of his actions, ought

to be governed and ought to let himself be governed, that is to say, directed toward his salvation, by someone to whom he is bound in a total, and at the same time meticulous and detailed, relation of obedience.<sup>5</sup>

Foucault makes clear in various texts during this period that the Christian practices of the self were in many ways precursors to modern practices of governmentality i.e. the configuration of power and knowledge characteristic of the modern state.<sup>6</sup> To cite another example, in “‘Omnes et Singulatum’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason” Foucault notes that the Christian pastoral instituted practices whereby the individual subordinated herself to a spiritual guide. This spiritual obedience required that the contents of one’s soul be laid bare through public confession, hence, the knowledge of the individual was both specific to the individual yet complete. Foucault argues in this essay that if we wish to understand precisely how the modern subject came to be, we must understand this individuating knowledge was manifest in pre-modern Christian societies.

Although Foucault acknowledges his lack of expertise in the area of Iranian politics and religion (and therefore his perspective is necessarily partial and distorted), a source of his fascination with Islam lies in the relationship between the state and religion:

Persia has had a surprising destiny. At the dawn of history, it invented the state and government. It conferred its models of state and government on Islam, and its administrators staffed the Arab Empire. But from the same Islam, it derived a religion that, throughout the centuries, never ceased to give an irreducible strength to everything from the depths of a people that can oppose state power (Afary and Anderson, 203).

In his essay “‘Omnes et Singulatum,’” Foucault had shown how the techniques of the self practiced throughout the ancient Greek and Roman world was transformed by Christian practices of the self, as well as how these Christian practices of the self prefigured certain disciplinary regimes of modern governmentality. His writings on Islam evince a respect for what this passage cites as an irreducible quality of Shiism—that its adherents’ belief in the coming of the

Mahdi (roughly equivalent to the Messiah in various Judeo-Christian traditions, according to Afary and Anderson)<sup>7</sup> gives them critical tools to oppose what Foucault terms the ‘archaic modernity’ of the Shah. The difference between a messianic tendency that fosters quietism and a retreat from the world and that of the Shi’ite sect is that it is the faithful that will bring about the coming of the Mahdi.<sup>8</sup>

The Shi’ite clergy fuses the religious with the political. There is a messianic streak in the Shi’ite sect of Islam that amounts to a profound dissatisfaction with the status quo. However, while this dissatisfaction does not manifest itself as an attitude of quietism or utter resignation with this world in favor of the next, it should not be mistaken for revolutionary ardor either. The duty of the religious believer is to defend, even through martyrdom if necessary, the faithful against the evil of the state.<sup>9</sup>

Foucault must have been impressed with the contrast between this form of religious belief and the ideal self-relation in medieval Christianity. In *Fearless Speech*, Foucault elaborates on the Christian conception of *askesis*, understood as the specific work one practices upon oneself in order to constitute oneself as an ethical subject. In these lectures, he enumerates two ways that the Christian practices of *askesis* differ from their Greek predecessors:

But the Greek conception of *askesis* differs from Christian ascetic practices in two ways: (1) Christian asceticism has as its ultimate aim or target the renunciation of the self, whereas the moral *askesis* of the Greco-Roman philosophies has as its goal the establishment of a specific relationship to oneself—a relationship of self-possession and self-sovereignty; (2) Christian asceticism takes as its principal theme detachment from the world, whereas the ascetic practices of the Greco-Roman philosophies are generally concerned with endowing the individual with the preparation and the moral equipment that will permit him to fully confront the world in an ethical and rational manner.<sup>10</sup>

However, this passage only underlines Foucault’s previous observation that the configurations of subjectivity formulated in the Christian context of the early Middle Ages were essentially an escape from the cares of this world and a retreat into the refuge of the self. It is only at the

beginning of the modern period that Christianity becomes capable of contesting the various scientific disciplines that sought to control populations—it was only at the beginning of the modern period that members of the various sects of Christianity begin to refuse what they saw themselves becoming. This is roughly the parallel that Foucault detected in the critical possibilities inherent in Shi'ism.

## **2. A Strange Revolution**

The form the Islamic revolution in Iran takes is not unique. Both Eastern and Western societies exhibit this intersection between revolt and religion:

Because it is in this way both “outside of history” and in history, because each person stakes his life and his death, one can understand why uprisings have been able to find their expression and their drama so readily in religious forms. For centuries, all of these promises of the hereafter or of the renewal of time, whether they concerned the awaited savior, the kingdom of the last days, or the reign of the absolute good, did not constitute an ideological cloak. Instead, they constituted the very manner in which these uprisings were lived, at least in those places where the religious forms lent themselves to such possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

Pre-modern revolutions retained an apparent connection to religion, because these revolts were both immanent to historical time and transcended it by heralding a new social order. Modern revolutions undeniably secularized this affiliation between sacred and profane time that was constitutive for the pre-modern concept of revolt, but if we wish to understand the experience of ordinary Iranians as they lived through this Revolution, we must recall this older affiliation between religion and revolution, for this was “a movement strong enough to bring down a seemingly well-armed regime, all the while remaining in touch with the old dreams that were once familiar to the West, when it too wanted to inscribe the figures of spirituality on the grounds of politics”<sup>12</sup>

Foucault describes the opposition to the Shah in terms of a unified general will, echoing Rousseau:

It is surprising to see this immense country, with a population distributed around two large desert plateaus, a country able to afford the latest technological innovations alongside forms of life unchanged for the last thousand years, a country that is languishing under censorship and the absence of public freedoms, and yet demonstrating an extraordinary unity in spite of all this [...] This will includes something disconcerting. It is always based on the same thing, a sole and very precise thing, the departure of the shah. But for the Iranian people this end means *everything*.<sup>13</sup>

Foucault goes on to argue that the shah represents for the people of Iran their dependence upon “global hegemonic” powers outside of Iran, primarily the United States, but the Soviet Union as well. This is the source of the movement’s power and its suspicion of politics. It is the unified nature of this will makes it impervious to political manipulation, for political manipulation and politics itself presupposes factions within a given populace. It is the very unity of the will of the people that make this popular religious uprising a revolt, albeit a revolt which initially seems very strange to modern secularized Westerners, for the revolution was not a revolt against religion and its strictures (which is the Enlightenment understanding of modernity to which most of us are accustomed) but was rather a revolt against the very idea of secular modernity itself, as this idea was embodied in the figure and the policies of the Shah. Foucault points out that this idea of modernity embodied by the Shah was itself archaic, an outmoded relic of the early twentieth century ideals of secularization espoused by Ataturk in Turkey in the wake of the first world war:

Out of the whole Kemalist programs, international politics and the international situation left to the Pahlavis only one bone to chew on, that of modernization. This modernization is now utterly rejected, not only because of the setbacks that have been experienced, but also because of its very principle. With the present agony of the regime, we witness the last moments of an episode that started almost sixty years ago, the attempt to modernize the Islamic countries in a European fashion.<sup>14</sup>

The Shah is by this time a thoroughly pathetic figure, clinging to a dream of modernization in which no one any longer believes.

The Iranian Revolution remains a strange one, Foucault reports. It is not until February 11, 1979, when crowds take to the streets, arsenals are raided and emptied, that some begin to sense that this revolt is a familiar one, and yet even after this point, the revolution refuses to follow the Western script, in which religion cedes the field to secular authority. The revolution continues its strange course, twenty-five years after the events of 1979, for it still refuses to follow the Western script. As Foucault said in an interview published in March, 1979 “Many here and some in Iran are waiting for and hoping for the moment when secularization will at last come back to the fore and reveal the good, old type of revolution we have always known. I wonder how far they will be taken along this strange, unique road, in which they seek, against the stubbornness of their destiny, against everything they have been for centuries, ‘something quite different.’”

### **3. Conclusion**

It is true that Foucault was wrong-profoundly wrong, in fact-about the significance of events in Iran. It might be that Foucault is guilty, as Afary and Anderson claim, of making the concrete and various religious practices of Islam into an abstraction and thereby repeating the errors so commonly made by Western intellectuals who attempt to comment on Islam. It might even be that he is guilty of glorifying the revolution through his interpretation of the revolution as an expression of political spirituality. He admits to at least a lack of expertise when he writes:

I cannot write the history of the future, and I am also rather clumsy at foreseeing the past. However, I would like to try to grasp *what is happening right now*, because these days nothing is finished, and the dice are still being rolled. It is perhaps this that is the work of a journalist, but it is true that I am nothing but a neophyte.<sup>15</sup>

Foucault's fallibilism is on display in this passage. With this admission, Foucault places himself in the company of those thinkers who, beginning with Kant, sought to determine what difference today makes with regard to yesterday—to write the history of the present. As Foucault writes a propos of Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" piece:

Now, the way Kant poses the question of *Aufklärung* is entirely different: it is neither a world era to which one belongs, nor an event whose signs are perceived, nor the dawning of an accomplishment. Kant defines *Aufklärung* in an almost entirely negative way, as an *Ausgang*, an "exit," a "way out." [...] He is not seeking to understand the present on the basis of a totality or of a future achievement. He is looking for a difference: What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?<sup>16</sup>

Like his predecessor, Foucault attempted in his writings on the Iranian Revolution to comprehend the present on its own terms. Admittedly, we now know with all the advantages that come with hindsight that his analysis was flawed. Rather than discussing all the things that Foucault got wrong in his analysis, it might be more constructive to analyze the place of these writings within the context Foucault's thought, which is hopefully what I have begun to do here.

Afary and Anderson claim that Foucault uncritically champions traditional Shi'ism in its struggle against the forces of modernity. This is an oversimplification; in fact, Foucault describes the modernization advocated by the shah as 'archaic' and draws parallels between the Shi'ism and the values espoused by Enlightenment thinkers. It would thus be a mistake to conflate Foucault's appeal to pre-modern Western ideas concerning the relationship between politics and spirituality for nostalgia, just as one would be mistaken in confusing Foucault's investigation of ancient Greek ways of caring for the self for the advocacy of a return to these ways. Afary and Anderson are too quick to mistake Foucault's attempts to analyze a particular political situation *in medias res* with a glorification of this situation, and then they compound this mistake by generalizing from these texts to making conclusions about Foucault's philosophical

positions. If these texts are read carefully, they might shed light on aspects of Foucault's philosophy. At the very least, we ought to follow Foucault's example and refrain from oversimplifying a complex situation. Foucault's writings on Iran stand as an attempt, however flawed it may appear to us after the fact, to come to terms with a difficult political situation without attempting to explain it away.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (NY: Pantheon, 1972 [1969]). For a recent investigation of the role of history in Foucault's thought as a whole and its relationship to Sartrean Existentialism, see Thomas Flynn's outstanding study *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason, Volume 1: Toward an Existentialist Theory of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and *Volume Two: A Poststructuralist Mapping of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, "Tehran: Faith Against the Shah," in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*.

<sup>4</sup> Recently, scholars have begun to take notice of the role religion plays in Foucault's thought. For example, see *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* Ed. James Bernauer and Jeremy Carette (NY: Ashgate, 2004) and Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*. Ed. Jeremy Carette (London: Routledge, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault attempts to delimit the meaning of governmentality in the following way:

1. The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security.
2. That tendency that, over a long period and throughout the West, has steadily led toward the preeminence over all other forms (sovereignty, discipline, and so on) of this type of power—which may be termed "government"—resulting, on the one hand, in the formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses and, on the other, in the development of a whole complex of knowledges [*savoirs*]
3. The process or, rather, the result of the process through which the state of justice of the Middle Ages transformed into the administrative state during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and gradually became "governmentalized." ("Governmentality," *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume 3: Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, NY: New Press, 1997, 220).

<sup>7</sup> Afary and Anderson, 41: "Twelver Shi'ites claim that enemies and rival groups assassinated the first eleven imams and that the twelfth imam went into occultation in 874 CE. He will reappear at the end of the world as the Mahdi (i.e. the messiah/the promised one), declare God's judgment, and reinstate justice."

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, "What are the Iranians Dreaming About?" in Afary and Anderson, 205 makes the following claim regarding Shi'ite messianism:

As for Shi'ite doctrine, there is the principle that truth was not completed and sealed by the last prophet. After Muhammed, another cycle of revelation begins, the unfinished cycle of the imams, who, though their words, their example, as well as their martyrdom, carry a light, always the same and always changing. It is this light that is capable of illuminating the law from the inside. The latter is made not only to be conserved, but also to release over time the spiritual meaning that it holds. Although invisible before his promised return, the Twelfth Imam is neither radically nor fatally absent. It is the people themselves who make him come back, insofar as the truth to which they awaken further enlightens them

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, "Tehran: Faith against the Shah," in Afary and Anderson, 201-202.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2001), 143-144. Foucault makes clear in his concluding remarks that these seminars delivered at the University of California-Berkeley in 1983 were part of a genealogy of the critical attitude in the West. I am arguing that one way one might read his texts on

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the Iranian Revolution is as a continuation of this project, charting the specific differences between religious discourse and critique in the West and in Iran.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, "Is it Useless to Revolt?," in Afary and Anderson, 264.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, "The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt," in Afary and Anderson, 221.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, "The Shah is a Hundred Years Behind the Times," in Afary and Anderson, 196-197.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, "The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt" in Afary and Anderson, 220.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," *The Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 1: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. NY: New Press, 1997, 303.