Foucault and Iran Reconsidered: Revolt, Religion, and Neoliberalism

Michiel Leezenberg
University of Amsterdam

Introduction

Over three decades after his death and almost four decades after his famous, or notorious, journalistic writings on the revolt against the Pahlavi regime in Iran, the reception of Foucault's work is still very much ongoing. This is due at least in part to the steady flow of posthumous publications that have forced us to rethink much of what we thought we knew. A first wave of such publications arrived in 1994, with the publication of the massive four-volume *Dits et écrits*,[1] which, among much more, made Foucault's Iranian writings more widely available for the first time.[2] A second wave, the publication

[1]Michel Foucault, Daniel Defert, and Jacques Lagrange, *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

[2]A far less comprehensive collection was published in English as *Essential Writings*, 3 vols., Penguin, 2004. If the reader allows me an autobiographical aside: *Dits et écrits* appeared just as I was about to give up a largely fruitless search for the mostly Italian-language original texts of Foucault's Iranian reportages; I have published an initial study of these writings as "Power and Political Spirituality: Michel Foucault on the Islamic Revolution in Iran," *arcadia* 33 (1998): 72-

Michiel Leezenberg <m.m.leezenberg@uva.nl> teaches in the Philosophy and Religious Studies departments of the University of Amsterdam. He has published numerous articles on the social and intellectual history of the Islamic world, and on the history and philosophy of the humanities.

of Foucault's *Collège de France* lectures, started in 1997 and ended only in 2014, in French at least (the English translation of the final volume appeared in 2017); its reception has barely even begun. Currently, yet another wave of posthumous publications appears to be approaching: early in 2018, *Les aveux de la chair*, the fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*, was published; and reportedly, there are plans for the publication of a number of 1960s lectures on topics ranging from Marxism to literature.[3]

Readings of Foucault have changed considerably with the appearance of these posthumous publications. For our understanding of Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution, his 1979 *Collège de France* lectures on neoliberalism, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, published in 2004, would seem to be particularly relevant, since they were prepared and presented exactly at the time of his most intensive engagement with Iran.[4] As one of the earliest attempts to seriously engage with neoliberal economic theory from a non-Marxist perspective, these lectures have also attracted considerable attention – and polemics – in their own right; but here, I will explore them in connection with his Iranian writings.[5]

Below, I will, first, place these Iran writings in the context of Foucault's wider debate with Marxism; second, I discuss the extent to which they have been shaped by his own wider theoretical concerns of the period. Third, I will explore to what extent Foucault maintains

---

89. It is not clear, incidentally, whether the *Dits et écrits* text is based on Foucault's French-language original or on a translation from the Italian. The Italian-language edition, *Taccuino persiano* (Guerini, 1998), also includes an article, "Ritorno al profeta?," not included in *Dits et écrits* but largely identical to the French-language "À quoi rêvent les iraniens?" (*Dits et écrits,* III: 688-694).

[3]Stuart Elden, personal communication, 31 May 2017.

[4]Michel Foucault, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Michel Senellart, *La Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004). English translation: Michel Foucault, Michel Senellart, Graham Burchell, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[5]See, in particular, Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Polity Press 2015).

his genealogical views, or insights, in his discussions of Iran, and of the Orient more generally. Fourth and finally, I will discuss how several authors on the Middle East, in particular Talal Asad, though claiming to follow Foucault, in fact revert to more conventional theoretical models. This section is of necessity somewhat polemical; but its aims are constructive rather than destructive. Jointly, these considerations point out the fact that the assimilation of Foucault's ideas and methods in the historicizing study of the modern Middle East is still far from complete.

1. Foucault, Revolt, and Revolution

In the spring of 1978, Foucault was approached by the editor of the Italian daily *Corriere della sera* to write a series of articles; instead, he proposed forming a group of authors to write about a variety of contemporary issues in which, he felt, new ideas were erupting. Apparently, Foucault did not initially plan to have any member of his proposed team write on Iran when he first conceptualized the "journalism of ideas" project in March 1978. It was not until after 19 August, it seems – in the wake of a fire in an Abadan cinema that caused 377 deaths and led to nationwide protests in Iran – that Foucault decided, not only to have Iran included in the projected series of articles, but also to visit the country himself. He made a first trip to Iran from 16 to 24 September 1978, and another from 9 to 15 November. His articles were published in the *Corriere* between late September 1978 and early February 1979. Little if anything of Foucault's more theoretical concerns is directly visible in these journalistic writings; conversely, his Iranian experiences do not appear anywhere in his 1979 *Collège de France* lectures or his other academic publications. Yet, as I will argue below, at crucial junctures, there are clear and substantial thematic links between them.

Only from the third of these articles did Foucault start zooming in on religion as a factor in the protests. Famously, he writes how, when he asked locals what they wanted, nine times out of ten they would answer

not "revolution," but "Islamic government."[6] He was both fascinated and disturbed by this answer, and in particular by the apparent willingness of so many Iranians to risk their lives for a slogan which they could not give a precise meaning or content. Moreover, the fact that the population did not call for revolution pointed out to Foucault the historical and geographical limitations of that term, and with it, of course, of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism. He saw neither a revolutionary consciousness shaped by class contradictions nor a leading revolutionary vanguard, as Leninist theory and practice would have it, but rather what he called an "absolutely unified collective will" for the Shah to leave.

Based in part on his encounter with Ayatollah Shari'atmadari, Foucault claimed that no one in Iran understood by "Islamic government" a wish for Iran's Shi'ite clergy to play "a role of ruling or framing."[7] With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to criticize these overconfident claims; eventually, Khomeini's wish for the Islamic republic led by a non-elected "council of guardians" consisting of elderly, and exclusively male, clerics, was to come out victorious in the 1979 power struggle. Moreover, Foucault, somewhat idealistically, and undoubtedly driven in part by his then ongoing studies of Christian self-practices, saw the Iranian revolt as reflecting a desire not only for a change of government and of political organization, but also for a change of selves; specifically, he saw the Shi'ite Islam that – as he correctly observed – informed the protests rather more than Marxist-Leninist slogans as carrying the promise of a change in subjectivity as a result of its esoteric spiritual dimension.[8]

Among the authors he studied in preparing for his visit were sociologist Paul Vieille and, more remarkably, Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin.[9] As Ghamari-Tabrizi puts it, Foucault's reading of Massignon

[6]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III*:* 600-691.

[7]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 749.

[8]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 749.

[9]Following the latter's highly idiosyncratic, and even downright ahistorical reading of Iranian-Islamic intellectual history, Foucault tends to see mystical and esoteric Shi'ism as embodying a timeless Iranian spirituality. I will return to this point below.

and Corbin "predisposed" him to "grasp the revolution he observed in terms of the spiritual reenactment of the 'Seekers of the Truth.'"[10] Quite probably, it was these orientalist authors, and Foucault's own reading on ethical and political subjectivation in the Church Fathers as part of his research for the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality*,[11] which focused his attention on the revolt's religious dimensions rather than its material causes. In other words: the religious and spiritual dimension of the revolt was not so much something Foucault *discovered* as a result of his speaking with locals; rather, he had been interested in these dimensions, or backgrounds, from the moment he started studying the country in earnest, as a result of his wider interest in spiritual self-practices.

What attracted Foucault in Iran was not the prospect of revolution (which, in August and early September, was remote anyway), but the phenomenon of revolt: he was focused on the protests against a particular mode of government, rather than in the subsequent power struggle in the creation of a new political order. Foucault was both intrigued and horrified by the spectacle of an unarmed population defying, and eventually overthrowing, one of the strongest and most repressive states in the world, having not only a formidable army, police force, and intelligence service of its own, but also the backing of the United States. He found the clarity and simplicity of the calls for Islamic government "familiar, but hardly reassuring,"[12] qualifying the voices of the mullahs calling for the Shah's departure as "terrible," etc.[13] Thus, one can hardly claim in earnest, as has been done by numerous detractors, most notoriously Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, that Foucault was "blinded" by his "enthusiasm" for the Islamic revolution, or that he "supported," "endorsed" or "welcomed" Khomeini or the Islamic re-

[10]Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 73.

[11]cf. Foucault, *Dits et écrits* I: 55.

[12]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 692.

[13]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 686.

public out of an alleged cultural relativism and hatred for Western secular modernity.[14] Afary and Anderson make serious errors both in their rendering of Foucault's views and in their account of the Iranian revolution;[15] here, however, I would like to focus on the methodological differences between their approach and that of Foucault. In particular, Afary and Anderson appear to 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. As Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi correctly notes, one of the main targets of Foucault's analyses of the revolt is the Marxist account of revolution, partly shaped by then-ongoing debates surrounding François Furet's revisionist account of the 1789 French Revolution, which rejected classical and Marxist views that it was driven by class antagonisms.[16] One should not underestimate Marxism's continuing grip on large parts of the French Left during the 1970s. The relentlessly anti-Marxist attitude appearing in Foucault's Iran writings – and, less emphatically, in his lectures on neoliberalism – is undoubtedly what most irritated, and continues to irritate, his secularist and modernist readers from the Left, like Afary and Anderson, and more recently Zamora and Behrent.[17] Foucault does not so much reject emancipatory revolutionary politics, however, as question the applicability of a particular, and historically and geographically specific, concept of revolution: he emphasizes the difficulties in characterizing the religiously inspired revolts in Iran as a "revolution" that involves class struggle, vanguards, and the like.[18] Qualifying the Iranian revolt as a theatrical event, and as a collective ritual comparable to the performance of a Greek tragedy, he argues that it does not stage class struggle as a major element of either its

[14]Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Michel Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), Introduction.

[15]For a detailed argument, see Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, ch. 3.

[16]Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 68ff. Cf. François Furet, *Penser la révolution française* (Paris: Gallimerd, 1978).

[17]Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, eds. *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015).

[18]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 759.

vocabulary or its *dénouement*.[19] The revolt, he claims, is not driven by economic difficulties or demands, but has a purely political character, and is inspired by a religion which speaks less of the hereafter than of the transfiguration of this world.[20] Moreover, he repeatedly argues that the revolt is marked by the *absence* of class antagonisms and of a vanguard party, claiming that the different strata of Iranian society are precisely unified by a formidable and absolutely collective will, namely, the wish for the Shah to step down.[21] Yet, he continues, this absolutely collective will embodies a revolt *against* politics rather than a concrete political program: it is the "most modern, and the maddest, revolt," against both liberalism and socialism, and by extension against the secular, modern subjectivity both forms of government, or governmentality, impose on their populations.[22]

This emphasis – indeed overemphasis – of the unitary character of the will Foucault sees embodied in the revolts may reflect not so much a blindness for political, ethnic and/or sectarian differences as a desire to emphasize, against Marxist accounts, that the revolts were not characterized or caused by class contradictions or led, or brought to consciousness, by a Leninist vanguard. In part, Foucault was surely right in this: he correctly called attention to one of the most remarkable aspects of the revolution, the – temporary but all- important – alliance between *mostazafin* or "oppressed" and *bazaris*, or urban merchants. He also ventured the suggestion that Islam might become a revolutionary force across the Muslim world, which could mobilize the people more easily for, in particular, the Palestinian cause than Marxist-Leninist rhetoric. Wishful thinking or not, this sounds prophetic indeed: during the 1980s, and especially after the 1989 collapse of the communist East Bloc, new forms of revolutionary political Islam would indeed come to replace communism as the major antiliberal and anti-Western political discourse. What Foucault did not see, and

[19]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 745.

[20]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 712-3, cf. 748.

[21]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 703, 715, 746.

[22]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 716.

what he hardly could have foreseen, is the fact that this newly politicized and newly revolutionary force of Islam, whether a Shi'ite or a Sunni guise, would reproduce or incorporate numerous Marxist-Leninist elements both in its ideologies and in its organizational forms.

2. Neoliberalism, Government, and Resistance

After this discussion of Foucault's reservations about the Marxist concept of revolution, let us now look at the fact that he was preparing, and in part giving, his *Collège de France* lecture series on neoliberalism at precisely the time when he was visiting, and writing on, Iran – a fact which seems to have escaped Afary and Anderson as well as Zamora and Behrent. Foucault was as intrigued by neoliberal technologies of government as he was fascinated by the Iranian revolt: he saw both as offering opportunities, or hopes, for overcoming or at least resisting existing forms of government, or political rationalities, in particular those of socialism, social democracy and the welfare state in Europe, and of secular authoritarianism in Iran. That need not imply, however, that he was naively optimistic about either. Given his earlier, and consistent, rejection of all forms of utopianism, it would be surprising indeed if he were to uncritically accept or endorse the utopian projects of either neoliberals or Islamists.

Obviously, there is no one entity or phenomenon to be labeled "neoliberalism," as Foucault would have been the first to acknowledge. In fact, he himself strictly distinguished between two of its best-known varieties, German postwar Ordoliberalism and the "Chicago School," which emerged (or crystallized) around Milton Friedman in the 1970s. This decade, in Europe and the U.S. at least, marked the demise of Keynesianism, in part as a result of a persistent "stagflation," and in part due to structural transformations which announced the development of a postindustrial society and with it the transfiguration of the "working class" as conceptualized by Marx and Engels. In retrospect, it is clear how deep the 1970s crises were, and how radical the neoliberal reform policies introduced by Thatcher, Reagan, and others, but we do not know to what extent Foucault and

others perceived that something qualitatively novel was going on. Obviously, one should not project what we know now onto the past, when nobody could have possibly known how deep and dramatic its impact would be several decades later.

Clearly, Foucault saw these lectures – given at a time when his theoretical attention was already shifting from modern modalities of power to early Christian techniques of subjection – as a preliminary to a more complete account of modern biopolitics; but the latter never materialized. One should not lose from sight, however, the fact that for Foucault, the analysis of liberalism as a governmental regime that rejects the classical *raison d'état* is a prerequisite for understanding biopolitics. In the question of liberalism, he adds, our "immediate and concrete actuality" presents itself [23]– just as the protests in the name of Islamic government constitute the immediate and concrete actuality of the Iranians. Both liberalism as a mode of government and Iran as a mode of revolt, then, were part of his wider philosophical concern with actuality, that is, with the question of Enlightenment as posing the philosophical problem of actuality as an event, and of the question of "what is happening to us right now?"[24]

In part because of Foucault's shift from conflict and resistance to governmentality, but perhaps also because of his focus on a number of foundational texts rather than on actual contemporary neoliberal practice as it could be found in, say, Pinochet's Chile, *La Naissance de la biopolitique* pays rather less attention to struggle and resistance than some of his other genealogical works.[25] One cannot infer from this,

[23]Foucault et al., *Naissance de la biopolitique,* 23-4, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 22.

[24]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 783.

[25]This absence should not, of course, be construed as an endorsement of any particular kind of government; Foucault's entire project seems precisely to make visible liberalism as a technology of government rather than merely an economic doctrine. It may be worth keeping in mind that even *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* was long seen as lacking any notion of resistance to disciplinary power, even if Foucault unemphatically but unambiguously states that Bentham's panopticon is not so much a reality as a "diagram of a form of power: its ideal form, […] *abstracted away from all resistance*" (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books 1979), 205; emph. added).

however, that Foucault was so blinded by anti-Marxism and "anti-étatism" that he did not see the darker sides of neoliberalism; but this is precisely the conclusion drawn by some of the contributions to the 2015 volume on Foucault and neoliberalism edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent. The general thrust of this work is that Foucault was not merely interested in neoliberalism, but positively sympathetic to it, in part because he was looking for an alternative to a French Left dominated by Marxism and the PCF, the French Communist Party, and in part because he allegedly had come to doubt both the feasibility and the desirability of revolution by 1977.[26] More specifically, Zamora and Behrent argue during this period Foucault was associated with the so-called "second left," which focused on self-management (*autogestion*) rather than state intervention, and whose main ideologist was Pierre Rosanvallon, a student of Foucault's. They see this association as indicative of Foucault's desire to seek an alternative both for revolutionary politics and for the socialist state.

In a gesture broadly comparable to Afary and Anderson's polemic, Zamora and Behrent argue that Foucault maintained an "illusory" belief that neoliberal forms of power would be less disciplining than liberal or social-democrat forms of governmentality,[27] but in their polemical zeal, they overlook the analytical point Foucault is trying to make here. A neoliberal technology of government, he argues, involves non-disciplinary forms of power, in that it is not based on the normalization of the abnormal or the exclusion (or seclusion) of what cannot be normalized. That is not to say, however, that it involves no form of power or no processes at all.

Foucault's criticisms of the welfare state remain as yet largely untapped. These do not, however, *pace* Zamora c.s., dovetail with neoliberal arguments, but amount to a far more radical view that the concern with public health and private well-being reflects the normalizing effects of disciplinary well-being and biopolitical forms of

[26]See in particular, Christofferson, *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, 17; cf. Behrent, *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, 47; Zamora, *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, 63.

[27]Zamora and Behrent, *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, 3.

government. Like Afary and Anderson, Zamora and Behrent implicitly or explicitly fall back on precisely the humanist, secularist, presentist and/or Marxist categories Foucault himself rejected, and tend to construe the absence of condemnations as endorsements; moreover, they depict Foucault's methodological efforts to abstract away from the state as an analytical or explanatory concept as a normative "hatred of the state."

Finally, and most importantly in the present context, the claim – repeatedly made by Zamora and others – that Foucault had given up on revolutionary politics collapses when one takes his writings on the Iranian revolution – written, as said, almost simultaneously with the preparation and presentation of his neoliberalism lectures – into account. From these, it becomes clear that Foucault had not rejected revolutionary politics, but merely the post-Rousseau Marxist-Leninist concept of revolution; this particular concept, he thought, had a specifically European history, which had come to an end by the late 1970s.

But Foucault was not only having increasing doubts about the Marxist concept of revolution. By mid-1978, he also appears to have concluded that the disciplinary state was in crisis, partly as a result of new forms of resistance;[28] as a result, he seems to have developed doubts about discipline, or, for that matter, biopolitics, as the defining power modality of modernity. Thus, a close reading of his 1979 lectures reveals that he saw liberalism – and especially neoliberalism – as precisely a *non*-disciplinary, that is, non-normalizing, modern technology of government.[29] More generally, at this time, his theoretical concerns were gradually shifting from power and knowledge to a less universally conflict-oriented focus on government and truth, which could also include or accommodate the government of the self. To the extent that any of these theoretical preoccupations are explicitly reflected in Foucault's journalistic works on Iran at all, it is

[28]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 532.

[29]*La Naissance de la biopolitique*, 254ff.; *The Birth of Biopolitics,* 248ff.

in his concern with government (and, on one occasion, "regimes of truth"), rather than power and knowledge,- let alone such technical notions as "discipline" or "biopolitics." Yet, his Iran writings leave open the question of what modalities of power and forms of governmentality shaped both the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic republic, and what, if any, role the economy played in them. By extension, a consistently genealogical study of other modern Middle Eastern states that does not relapse into either liberal or Marxist categories largely remains to be written.[30]

Thus, at first blush, there seems to be little if any overlap between Foucault's academic lectures and journalistic reportages. As Foucault was well aware, Iran under the Shah knew neither a liberal state nor a neoliberal economy, even if it was aligned with the United States; rather, it was what he called a "dependent dictatorship."[31] Hence, the entire thematic of liberalism as discussed in *La Naissance de la biopolitique* would seem simply irrelevant to his concern with Iran. And indeed, in his Iranian reportages, Foucault wrote little on how the Shah's regime tried to manage the economy, beyond noting the failure of the modernizing and market-oriented "White Revolution" of the 1960s.[32] It should be kept in mind, however, that Foucault was interested in liberalism and neoliberalism not primarily as economic doctrines or as bourgeois ideologies, but as technologies of government.

Moreover, there are indications that his research interests were already shifting away from modern Western government and towards spirituality as a form of resistance. Thus, in an interview held in early

[30]For a suggestive argument, based on the case of modern Egypt, that there is no such thing as "the economy" as a distinct space, sphere, or object of knowledge and government that follows a purely economic logic, see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002).

[31]Foucault*, Dits et écrits* III: 714.

[32]If anything, he paints an overly optimistic picture of the Iranian economy of the 1970s (which in fact, was having serious problems with inflation and overheating), undoubtedly out of a desire to counter Marxist explanations in terms of poverty or *Verelendung* as causes for working class revolutions (cf. Leezenberg 1998: 77).

1979 but not published until 2018, he distinguished spirituality from religion, characterizing it as "becoming something other than what one is," and as the possibility of revolt against the subject position one has been assigned by political, religious, and other powers. All great political, social and cultural upheavals, he continues, originated in spiritual movements.[33] Likewise, in his 1978 discussion with a group of Zen masters at the Seionji temple in Uenohara, Foucault remarked that the end of (Western) imperialism coincides with a crisis in Western philosophy, if not the end of the age of Western philosophy.[34] It is difficult to assess whether this was more than a polite remark towards his hosts; but what is most significant about these comments, at least in retrospect, is his further remark that this crisis in Western thought concerns the Western concept of revolution. This idea of revolution, he continued, has dominated European history since 1789; but in the 1970s, with the rise of non-revolutionary currents like Eurocommunism, it is in the process of disappearing.[35] Concerning the non-European world, he added, philosophers should abstain from predicting or prophesying possible futures, let alone prescribing what *should* be done; rather, he stated, philosophers should speak of what is going on in the present (*ce qui se passe actuellement*), adding that any philosophy of the future must be born outside of Europe, or out of the encounter between Europe and non-Europe.[36]

Here, once again, one sees Foucault's conviction that philosophers should be concerned with the present. More importantly, he also believed that they should pay more philosophical attention to the non-Western world. These words imply that, although the idea of revolution may be losing force *in Europe*, one should be attentive to – possibly different – forms and articulations of protest and revolt elsewhere in the world. And indeed, this is exactly what Foucault

[33]Éric Aeschmann, "Quand Foucault s'enthousiasmait pour la révolte iranienne," *L'Obs*, 8 February 2018: 73-78.

[34]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 620.

[35]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 620.

[36]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 622.

would set out to explore in the revolt in Iran a mere few months later. In a short statement accompanying his *Corriere della sera* reports, he called this kind of investigation "journalism of ideas," adding, "One must be present at the birth of ideas and at the explosion of their force; not in the books that pronounce them, but in the events in which they manifest their force and in struggles."[37]

This awareness of the historical and geographical specificity of European conceptions of the state and of revolution also appears in another text from this period. In "Analytical Philosophy of Politics," a lecture also presented in Japan, Foucault made a number of further comments on the Western philosophical notion of revolution that may help in understanding his focus on Iran. Rejecting as "laughable" the suggestion that the late twentieth century marks the end of the age of revolution, he argued that the end of the domination, or monopoly, of the idea of revolution does not simply consist in a return to reformist policies; what the protest of his day express, he argued, is a struggle against the very fact of power, the mere exercise of which is "unbearable."[38]

In other words, Foucault's Iran writings no more endorse the idea of Islamic government than his *Collège de France* lectures endorse neoliberalism as a governmental regime; on the contrary, they point precisely to innovative ways of analyzing and criticizing both. As he put it in his open letter to Mehdi Bazargan, "In the expression 'Islamic government,' why cast suspicion immediately on the adjective 'Islamic'? The word 'government' by itself is enough to awaken one's vigilance."[39] Likewise, Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism, is not a tacit way of endorsing it, as his detractors would have it, but opens up a novel – and still largely unexplored – way of criticizing it as a technology of government rather than an economic doctrine or a political ideology.

What links Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism to his views on Iran

[37]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 707.

[38]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 545-7.

[39]Foucault, *Essential Writings 3*: 44; *Dits et écrits,* III: 781.

and Japan, then, is not only his philosophical concern with the present and his interest in different forms of governmentality, but also his suggestion that the modern notion of revolution (and, by extension, the entire Marxist-Leninist revolutionary vocabulary) is not a universally applicable concept, but a historically and geographically specific phenomenon. Writing at a moment when both political Islam and neoliberal government were just about to burst on the world-historical scene, and writing some ten years before the rapid demise of Real Existing Socialism and Marxism-Leninism as major political forces, one cannot but admire Foucault's keen eye for what is unprecedented in the present.

3. Foucault, Genealogy, Orientalism

Undoubtedly, Foucault's writings were quite original and innovative in his own day and age; but are they still relevant forty years later? This question can be usefully split up into two parts: on the one hand the question of whether Foucault avoided the pitfalls of what Edward Said has, famously, labeled and criticized as "orientalism," and on the other, whether his own writings on Islam and the Orient and the publications of others claiming to follow in his footsteps live up to the demands of his genealogy.

At first blush, Foucault seems to have had a keen eye for what was novel in the Iranian revolution. At the time, the very idea of political spirituality as a non-secular, or non-secularist, form of modern political agency or subjectivity sounded like a conservative atavism, if not an outright contradiction – as Foucault was clearly aware. In subsequent decades, the world has grown accustomed to various other forms of newly political, or politicized religion and religious agency, ranging from different currents of political Islam to Hindu nationalism in India, neo-Confucianism in post-1989 China, and the post-Cold War resurgence of national churches in Eastern Europe.

This is not necessarily to say, however, that Foucault was on the right track in his approach to the history of non-Western ideas. This brings us to the question of orientalism. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi claims

that Foucault avoided the pitfalls of philological orientalism just as he rejected Marxist dialectical materialism,[40] but one may have doubts about this. Although much of *The Order of Things* may indeed be seen as a critique of philology in general (and by extension of philological orientalism), neither here nor elsewhere does Foucault ever voice any critical appreciation of orientalist knowledge as such or of the geographical imaginary informing it. This lack of reflection becomes particularly clear in his Iran writings. First, Foucault's ahistorical belief in an essentially timeless esoteric Shi'ite Iranian Islamic spirituality, and of Shi'ite Islam as possibly providing "indefinite resources" for opposition against any state power "since the dawn of history,"[41] betray a strong orientalist influence, in particular of Henry Corbin, who is in many respects a showcase example of the philological orientalist.[42] Second, Georg Stauth has argued that the very notion of "political spirituality" suggests a relapse into an orientalist view of (religious) ideas as determining social action.[43] While this may be an overstatement, or an oversimplification of Foucault's actual views, one may well question his emphasis on premodern religious factors in explaining a contemporary social and political phenomenon. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Foucault himself never questioned or thematized the geographical imaginary of orientalism. Despite his interest in questions of space and geography, throughout *The Order of Things* and other works, he generically and unquestioningly uses the term "the West" (*l'Occident*) as a seemingly self-evident civilizational space, and equally unquestioningly posits a generic, and partly mythical, "Orient" as a counterpoint or heterotopia for this space. Thus, most famously, the preface to *The Order of Things* presents a fictitious Chinese encyclopedia, *The Ce-*

[40]Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 65-68.

[41]Foucault*, Dits et écrits* III: 694.

[42]Thus, historian Claude Cahen has referred to Corbin's influential 1964 *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* as "disconcertingly ahistorical." Claude Cahen, *Der Islam* I (Fischer Weltgeschichte, Bd. 14, Fischer Verlag, 1968), 353; for more details, cf. Leezenberg (1998): 82-3.

[43]Georg Stauth, "Revolutions in Spiritless Times: An Essay on Michel Foucault's Enquiries into the Iranian Revolution," *International Sociology* 6, no.3 (1991): 259 -280.

lestial Emporium of Imperial Wisdom, which appears in a short text by Jorge Luis Borges, as a heterotopia exposing the arbitrariness, and possibly undermining the very logic, of the Western classifications discussed in the main body of the book. Likewise, Foucault's distinction between *scientia sexualis* and a premodern oriental *ars erotica* in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* has been widely criticized as uncritically orientalist. And it seems he saw both Japanese monasteries and Iranian streets as heterotopias that challenged some of the most fundamental assumptions of modernity, or more precisely of a modern, secular Western political rationality.

There is, however, another orientalist feature of Foucault's ideas on Iranian Shi'ite Islam that renders them, if not useless, at least outdated. This is his – in retrospect astonishing – failure to seriously ask whether the Islamic world may have known any epistemological innovations or ruptures as exposed in his own archaeologies of "Western" knowledge. Even though he asked whether one should see in the Iranian revolts the birth of something new rather than the return of something old,[44] he did tend to see "Shi'ite Iranian Islam" as a monolithic and substantially unchanging whole, and did not seriously raise the possibility of its having undergone any major changes, let alone tracing such changes in detail. Thus, for example, he passed over in silence the entire – admittedly complex and still little known – history of politicization of Islam in Iran, which started with the 1905 constitutional revolution in which substantial numbers of clergymen played an active role.

The most directly relevant text here would have been, of course, Ayatollah Khomeini's 1971 book on Islamic Government, which introduced the notion of *velayat-e faqîh*, or "guardianship of the jurist;" but this work had not yet been translated into any Western language, and was largely unknown even among specialists on modern Islamic, or Iranian, intellectual history – a specimen of scholar that at the time, was

[44]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 694.

rare anyway.[45] Be that as it may, Foucault discusses neither Khomeini's ideas (as opposed to his "lapidary" public statements and comments to journalists[46] and only briefly mentions Ali Shari'ati, whom he largely correctly – identifies as a main architect of "Islamic government in the sense of introducing a spiritual element into political life."[47] These brief comments do not do justice to the radically novel character of Shari'ati's rejection of the "official," politically quietist Islam of Iran's Shi'ite clergy in favor of a "religion of the oppressed" (*mostazafîn*), which is driven by socialist ideals of (social) justice and equality and even has a revolutionary dimension,. Nor does Foucault seem aware that Shari'ati's innovations were publicly denounced as heretical by virtually all major clerics in Iran except, significantly, Khomeini. Shari'ati's redefinition of Shi'ite Islam not only involves a radical, and clearly Marxist-Leninist inspired, transformation of Shi'ism into a revolutionary religion, which it had never been before; it also hardly if at all appeals to the esoteric spirituality Foucault sees as central to the Iranian regime of truth. Although Foucault does acknowledge Shari'ati's having read authors like Fanon and Massignon, he appears to take at face value Shari'ati's self-legitimations, like his claim that already the first Shi'ite imam taught equality and social justice.[48]

Foucault thus gives the impression of believing that nothing essential in either Iranian or Japanese society has changed by the advent of modern Western technology, and that basically unchanged traditional local ways of thinking coexist alongside modern ways, seen as European virtually by definition.[49] Such oversimplified statements overlook the enormous intellectual and other changes non-Western ways of thinking have witnessed as a result both of their internal dynamics and of encounters with other actors – notably, but not exclusively, the modern West.

---

[45]For an English translation, see Hamid Algar, trans., *Islam and Revolution I: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)* (Berkeley: Mizan Press 1981), 25-166.

[46]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 691.

[47]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 693.

[48]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 693.

[49]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 526, 681, 716.

4. Post-Foucauldian Genealogies of Islam

Foucault's apparent belief that oriental traditions like those of Zen Buddhism and Shi'ite Islam are essentially timeless, premodern, and/or unchanging is strikingly at odds with his archaeological and genealogical outlook and its keenness to expose ruptures and discontinuities. Elsewhere, he explicitly states that genealogy aims at precisely unmasking any semblance of identity, unity, or continuity implied by terms like *nation* or *tradition*.[50] A similar unwillingness to countenance discontinuities in non-Western traditions also appears in the self- proclaimed genealogical studies by Talal Asad, one of the most influential contemporary theorists of the modern Islamic world. An anthropologist with an initially strongly Marxist outlook, Asad made a Foucauldian turn of sorts in the 1980s, shifting to studies of monastic discipline in Medieval Christianity, and then moving on to genealogical analyses of the post-Enlightenment concepts of "religion" and "the secular," both of which he exposes as linked to a history of Western (and in part colonial) power.[51] Given this turn, Asad would seem well-placed to develop a full-fledged genealogical approach to the Islamic world; but, surprisingly, his numerous writings on things Islamic do not fulfill this expectation. Most famously, in his "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," Asad argues both against the idea that Islam, unlike Christianity, has power in its very essence, and against the view that the wide diversity in the beliefs and practices of Muslims prevents us from forming any single coherent analytical concept of "Islam." As an alternative, he famously proposes to approach Islam as a "discursive tradition."[52] Recently,

[50]See in particular Foucault, "Nietzsche, généalogie, histoire" (*Dits et écrits I*: 141, 147-8), where he adds that historical sense has a "dissociative" usage which "is opposed to history as continuity or tradition" (153).

[51]See, among others, "On Discipline and Humility in Medieval Christian Monasticism" and "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and "What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?," in *Formations of the Secular* (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[52]Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Papers Series (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986), esp. 14-17.

this view has been criticized as overemphasizing the theological and juridical dimensions of Islam, at the expense of mystical and poetic elements which in the everyday life of Muslims have been far more important over the centuries;[53] but here, I want to explore whether these analyses are as consistently genealogical in character as Asad himself proclaims. At first blush, his notion of a discursive tradition appears to reproduce Foucault's archaeological/genealogical favoring of discursive formations and, later, discursive practices over consciousness-philosophical and/or Marxist notions of ideas, ideologies, or beliefs; on closer inspection, however, it appears to be a communitarian rather than a genealogical or archaeological concept.[54] Asad readily acknowledges that his main source of inspiration is the communitarian philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre; but he passes over in silence the fact that the latter's communitarianism cannot easily, if at all, be reconciled with a genealogical perspective, and in fact repeatedly criticizes Nietzsche's genealogy – a criticism that, presumably, would also carry over to Foucault's use of Nietzsche.[55]

On several points, and despite his suggestions to the contrary, the communitarian character of Asad's own analyses appears to be indeed irreconcilable with a full-fledged genealogical account of modern Islam. First, Asad explicitly denies any discontinuity in this discursive tradition: "for analytical purposes, there is no essential difference... between 'classical' and 'modern' Islam."[56] Thus, he seems to presume the very identity and continuity which Foucault's genealogy sets out to destroy. Second, Asad is keen to emphasize that

[53]See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press 2016), in particular, 268-90.

[54]For another critique of Asad's genealogy along these lines, see David Scott, "The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad," in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford University Press 2006), esp. 138-45; for Asad's reply, see 233-5.

[55]For these anti-genealogical criticisms, see in particular Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), ch. 9 and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth 1988), ch. 2, 9.

[56]Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 15.

this Islamic discursive tradition is *reasonable*, wholly overlooking Foucault's suggestion that reason, or political rationality, may itself be implicated in power relations. Third, and even more surprisingly, his genealogical concern with power disappears from view in this characterization of Islam: although Asad pays lip service to questions of power, he dissolves it into an actorless and anonymous tradition in the guise of "authority": "a practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam."[57] Note the use of the passive voice here, and the replacement of "power" by terms like "authority'" and "authorization," which imply or suggest that whatever power relations are involved in the Islamic discursive tradition are agreed upon and/or legitimate.

Thus, Asad appears as keen to stress the reasonableness of the Islamic discursive tradition as he is to expose the power implicit in Western theoretical concepts. In itself this may be a useful antidote to tacit individualist and/or secularist assumptions that traditions have no room for reason, rational debate or individual liberty; but Asad seems to miss the analytical point of genealogy here. As a consequence, he misses the more radical genealogical suggestion that *any* form of reasonableness or rationality, whether premodern or modern, whether secular or religious, is internally linked to historically and geographically specific forms of power. This becomes most clearly – and most painfully – visible in Asad's analysis of public criticism in contemporary Saudi Arabia.[58] Not only does Asad rather misleadingly suggest here that there is an allegedly traditional responsibility to criticize the ruler incumbent on all Muslims individually (*fard ayn*); he also completely overlooks the fact that Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian state in which the conservative religious leadership makes use of a repressive state apparatus to stifle all forms of religious and political dissent. Put in more analytical and less polemical terms: Asad tends to downplay or ignore the crucial variable of power, in favor of

[57]Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 15.
[58]Talal Asad, "The Limits of Religious Criticism in the Middle East: Notes on Islamic Public Argument," in *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 200-236.

a picture of a more consensual and harmonious tradition of "religious criticism" and "rational debate."

This tendency to restrict genealogical critique to Western practices, and to revert to communitarian, liberal, and/or Marxist notions for the Islamic world, can also be found in other self-proclaimed followers of Foucault. For example, several authors writing on sexuality in the modern Muslim world, even though paying lip service to Foucault's writings, persistently to relapse into Marxist and psychoanalytic categories of "bourgeois sexuality" and "Victorian repression," even though Foucault explicitly argued that the analysis of modern sexuality needs a more fine-grained vocabulary than the Marxist notion of "class," and that the Victorian era *produced* rather than *repressed* discourse about sex.[59] To different degrees, this holds for the – otherwise admirable – studies of authors like Joseph Massad, Khaled el-Rouayheb, and Afsaneh Najmabadi.[60] Such and other authors tend to revert to representations of ideology as distortive of objective social realities; of class as determining in defining aspects of modernity; and of power as essentially repressive – all points systematically and forcefully criticized by Foucault.

In short, an inadvertent relapse into the secularist and modernist assumptions of Marxist and/or humanist views explicitly and systematically criticized by Foucault is by no means restricted to his polemically minded critics; it also appears among authors seeing themselves as walking in his footsteps. In this, sense, operationalizing and updating Foucault's views with an eye on the Middle East without falling back into more conventional habits of thought is a largely unfinished project.

---

[59]Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* I: 17, 114, 123.

[60]Cf. Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Beards and Men Without Moustaches: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005). Unfortunately, considerations of space preclude a fuller discussion of these works.

Conclusion

Foucault was interested in the Iranian revolt rather than the Islamic revolution, and in the spiritual dimensions of resistance rather than Islamic forms of government. In fact, his enduring preoccupation with, and criticism of specific forms and techniques of government precludes any naïve utopianism concerning the latter. Unless one mistakes the absence of invective for approval, one cannot accuse him of an uncritical sympathy or utopian hopes for the new regime in Iran. Likewise, his forays into neoliberalism may abstain from polemics, but should not be read as an endorsement. On the contrary, when read conjointly, both suggest that the concept of revolution presumed by his Marxist contemporaries (and by many present-day leftists) as universal is in fact historically and culturally specific. As such, these writings invite us to reflect on the uniqueness of the event of the Iranian revolution, instead of reducing it to allegedly universal, but ultimately Eurocentric, categories.

Foucault's substantial comments about Islam as a religion or tradition are not above criticism: most importantly, and most oddly, he appears to forget the relentlessly historicizing, discontinuity-oriented, and identity-undermining thrust of his own archaeological and genealogical analyses when writing about Iranian Shi'ite Islam. Moreover, if the above criticisms Asad, his followers, and other self-proclaimed applications of Foucault to the Islamic world hold, one may venture the hypothesis that a properly or consistently genealogical history of the modern Islamic world largely remains to be written. This claim may sound rather odd, given Foucault's immense influence in Middle East studies and in the humanities and social sciences more generally. It should be kept in mind, however, that Foucault emphatically did not intend his key notions to function as universally applicable theoretical concepts, but rather as tools meant to capture historically and geographically specific, if not unique, events and experiences. As he himself once put it, he was developing an analytic, not a theory, of power.[61]

[61]Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* 92-102.

Hence, a genealogical approach to the Islamic world need not – and perhaps should not – primarily ask whether a particular modern, or modernizing, Middle Eastern state is "disciplinary," or whether its policies are "biopolitical," but rather proceed in a more empirical and nominalist bottom-up manner, by exploring which parts of the population and which fields of experience became objects of government at what time, and what forms of knowledge or – religious or other – truth were involved in these processes. Some examples of the former approach are Timothy Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt*, which presents Muhammad Ali's reforms as disciplinary, and, as such, as "colonizing" by definition, regardless of whether Egypt was under actual colonial rule at the time; and Darius Rejali's important study on torture in modern Iran, which raises the question of why torture persists in modern disciplinary societies, where – on Foucault's perspective – the need for violent and cruel punishments has disappeared.[62]

There is a second caveat in Foucault's rejection of universals. The most important universal in this context is undoubtedly that of the state; but Foucault's criticism of it stems not so much from a "hatred of the state," as Zamora and Behrent would have it; it is primarily methodological. Already in 1976, he argues that over-attention to sovereign power located in the state prevents us from looking for non-sovereign forms of powers exercised elsewhere.[63] Likewise, in his famous lecture on governmentality, Foucault argues that the state as a unitary actor or institution is a "mythified abstraction"; that is, it is largely fictional.[64] And finally, in his 31 January 1979 lecture, while discussing what he calls the "state phobia" of some authors, Foucault once again talks of his wish to abstain from a theory of the state as if it were an "indigestible meal," stating his preference for speaking in more processual terms of "étatization."[65]

---

[62]Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Darius Rejali, *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press 1998).

[63]Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* I, 87-91.

[64]Foucault, *Dits et écrits* III: 655-6.

[65]Foucault, *La Naissance de la biopolitique*, 78-9; *The Birth of Biopolitics,* 77.

This call to look for other modalities, locations and articulations of power than the sovereign power exercised by the state is perhaps the most promising of the many suggestions implicit or explicit in Foucault's writings, even if in the case of Iran, let alone other Middle Eastern authoritarian states, it is by no means clear exactly what results it would yield. It may serve, however, as an antidote to the persistent tendency to "over-state the Arab state," as one famous study suggests;[66] or more constructively, it may us help to explore exactly what is specific to modernity in the modern Islamic world, and what forms of power and knowledge have gone into its making, without falling into the traps of Islamic exceptionalism, communitarianism, and eurocentrism.

[66]Nazih Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995). This study remains, however, within a political economy framework of state-society relations, class structure, modes of production, and the like.