

Risking Prophecy in the Modern State: Foucault, Iran, and the Conduct of the Intellectual

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For too long, Foucault scholars have kept Foucault's Iranian writings at arm's length. Considered a curiosity at best, the essays and dispatches that stem from his two visits to Iran in the fall of 1978 were long thought extraneous to Foucault's writings.¹ With the publication in recent years of Foucault's *Collège de France* lecture courses, we can begin to see how misguided this earlier view of these writings

¹Indeed, in his otherwise excellent reconstruction of Foucault's work during this period, Stuart Eeden adopts this attitude by dismissing Foucault's Iranian writings as mere journalism. See Stuart Eeden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016). On 101-102, he writes that "his reports, principally for the Italian newspaper *Corriere del Sera* [sic], have provoked controversy both at the time and since. Much of their detail is now of historical interest, and the way that events have developed has outstripped what is, in truth, journalism and prediction rather than the more considered work of his lectures, books, or other writings." In a footnote Eeden acknowledges those who have found these works to be a more significant part of Foucault's corpus, but I believe he remains too dismissive of Foucault's writings on Iran.

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truly was. The initial effort in this direction was made by the compilers of Foucault's Iranian writings in English, Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson.² While 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 on Iran.³ Initially, many readers and scholars of Foucault's writings reacted to these texts on events in Iran with puzzlement, if not outright embarrassment. Indeed, Afary and Anderson's interpretive essay can be seen as the culmination of this initial phase of the scholarly reception of Foucault's Iranian texts. Despite the fact that it attempts to place these writings within the broader context of Foucault's thought, it offers a thoroughly inadequate reading of Foucault's work.

More recently, Foucault scholars have attempted to place Foucault's writings on Iran within the broader context of his published writings and his lecture courses. Melinda Cooper's essay "The Law of the Household: Foucault, Neoliberalism, and the Iranian Revolution" is a good example of this more recent approach to Foucault's Iranian writings.⁴ Cooper's essay contextualizes Foucault's writings in terms of his analysis of two very different revolutions (the neoliberal "revolution" and Iranian Revolution) by reading Foucault's dispatches from Iran alongside his 1978-1979 *Birth of Biopolitics* lecture course. My own approach will be similar to Cooper's, but I wish to examine these writings through the lens of the course that Foucault delivered

²Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, eds., *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³The inadequacies of Afary and Anderson's interpretive essay were recognized in the first reviews of the book by Foucault scholars. See, for example, James Bernauer's review essay of *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 6 (2006): 781-786 and Richard Lynch's review in *Foucault Studies*, no. 4 (February 2007): 169-176. More recently, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi has used Foucault's Iranian writings as the basis to reinterpret the Iranian Revolution. See *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

⁴Cooper's essay appears in the collection *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism*, eds. Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter (NY: Fordham University Press, 2014), 29-58.



just prior to visiting Iran, the 1977-1978 lecture course subsequently published as *Security, Territory, Population*. In this course Foucault develops the concepts of conduct and counter-conduct that represent both a shift in how he conceives power relations and an anticipation of his later work on the care of the self. Like his Iranian writings, *Security Territory, Population* should be read on its own terms as well as seen as a text that serves as an incubator for subsequent work. In other words, these writings are transitional, provided that we understand this transition as the work of transforming his previous writings and conditioning what comes later rather than a simple move from one position to another. Just as Melinda Cooper suggests that we read Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism in terms of his Iranian writings and in anticipation of his later work on the care of the self, I want to trace another trajectory that runs through counter-conduct and its attendant risks, the Iranian Revolution, and *parresia* read through the lens of governmentality and the intellectual's political attempts to understand, critique, and ultimately contest modern technologies of government.⁵ I hope to contribute to this more recent interpretive trend by examining how governmentality and *parresia* (or at least anticipations of these) can be seen to function within Foucault's writings on Iran.

Foucault becomes increasingly interested in *parresia* (frank or fearless speech) in his lecture courses of the 1980s, but we can glean the origins of this later concern with fearless speech through Foucault's conception of counter-conduct as developed in *Security, Territory, Population*. The first section of this essay focuses on the role that governmentality plays in Foucault's Iran texts before making the connection between governmentality and *parresia* plain. The

⁵Melinda Cooper, *The Government of Life*, 32. In his dialogue with Baqir Parham, Foucault characterizes the intellectual as one whose action are always already political, and he claims that since the French Revolution the role of the intellectual has always been understood in terms of prophecy. He accepts this conception of the intellectual with the stipulation that the intellectual function specifically rather than universally. He then proceeds to situate the intellectual within the context of revolutionary praxis and the risks of thought. See *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 183-184. We will explore this connection further below.

second section focuses on various anticipations of *parresia* in Foucault's writings on the Iranian Revolution beginning with Foucault's understanding of the intellectual's political role and his claim that we understand philosophy as "the politics of truth" before turning to Foucault's ambivalent remarks concerning the intellectual's prophetic voice. Finally, I conclude with some general considerations of Foucault's conception of the modern intellectual, based upon insights from his Iranian writings and his collaborative work in the early 1970s with the *Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons* (GIP) and his characterization of Ali Shariati as the intellectual voice of the Iranian Revolution.

1. Governmentality and Modern State Power in Iran

With the publication of Foucault's lecture courses, it becomes much easier to see the coherence and hidden congruencies within his work. The earliest reception of Foucault's work was driven by a belief that his work consisted of distinct periods in which the work of the later period superseded that of the earlier period. The conception of the later Foucault rewriting the work of his earlier self is the basis of Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow's influential study *Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Indeed, their approach makes it seem as if the works of the later Foucault constitute an erasure and revision of the earlier one, for by their account, Foucault senses that his archaeology led to a methodological dead-end so he develops his genealogical method. However, such an interpretive approach forces the reader to discount Foucault's own claim that he was doing both archaeology and genealogy in his later works. More recently, Thomas E. Flynn has argued more convincingly for a prismatic approach that finds Foucault's work coalescing around three main themes, that of knowledge, power, and ethics. Flynn's interpretive strategy provides a better account of the relationship between the lecture courses and the published work, for Foucault did not strive to provide the final word on anything. In the lecture courses, we can see him constantly returning to what he has previously said and rethinking it—not in order to correct it, but to open it up for new exploration.

The lecture courses do not provide the last word, nor should they take precedence over the published works, but do they help us to better grasp Foucault at work.

If we keep these methodological considerations in mind, we can better grasp how Foucault's lecture courses relate to each other and how his occasional writings in turn relate to both the lecture courses and the published works. No doubt Foucault proceeds through fits and starts, and we would not want to minimize various discontinuities and dead ends present in his lecture courses, but we find correspondences and connections within them as well. Here, I wish to focus on the connection between Foucault's treatment of governmentality (understood as the conduct of conduct) on the one hand and the two of the forms that resistance to governmentality may take, counter-conduct and *parresia*. From this connection we can see how Foucault conceives of the conduct of the intellectual in his lecture courses and how this conception informs Foucault's Iranian writings. In other words, the conclusion of this section will examine the question of whether Foucault reconceives his conception of the intellectual's role in contemporary society as a result of the events witnessed in Iran. In the next section I will show how these related concepts provide insights into Foucault's Iran writings and his conception of the intellectual during the last years of his life.

In the "Course Context" to *Security, Territory, Population*, Michel Senellart places the 1978 lecture course within the broader trajectory of Foucault's writings. The lecture courses from 1976-1979 form a triptych in which Foucault broaches the topic of biopower and biopolitics, but always haltingly and indirectly. He announces the project in his 1976 course *Society Must Be Defended* as well as in the conclusion to the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. As Senellart points out, it is as if this conception of the various mechanisms that govern life can only be approached obliquely. He announces the biopower project (biopower understood here as the various modern technologies of power that take populations as their object) toward the end of *Society Must Be Defended*, but he does not begin to de-



velop the concept until 1978 (Foucault did not offer a course at the *Collège de France* in 1977). Even here, the lectures quickly turn away from a general analytic of biopower and toward a more specific analysis of governmentality; indeed, by the fourth lecture, governmentality and pastoral power have taken center stage.⁶ Similarly, Foucault begins *The Birth of Biopolitics* by announcing that he will focus that year's lectures on biopower but quickly takes up the birth of neoliberalism. "What is actually involved in both cases is bringing to light the forms of experience and rationality on the basis of which power over life was organized in the West. But at the same time the effect of this research is to shift the center of gravity of the lectures from the question of biopower to that of government, to such an extent that in the end the latter almost entirely eclipses the former."⁷ Whether it is because Foucault realizes that he cannot say anything about biopolitics without first developing the concept of governmentality itself (in *Security, Territory, Population*) and neoliberal governmentality (in *The Birth of Biopolitics*) or for some other reason, one of the interesting consequences of this decision to focus on governmentality in these lectures is that the anticipation of the later work becomes readily apparent. Senellart points this out: "Breaking with the discourse of the 'battle' employed from the 1970s, the concept of 'government' would mark the first shift, becoming more pronounced from 1980, from the analytics of power to the ethics of the subject."⁸ Foucault completes the *Security, Territory, Population* lectures in

⁶Later in 1978, after he gives the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures and returns from Iran, Foucault gives a series of interviews with Duccio Trombadori. In the last of these interviews, Foucault provides a helpful definition of governmentality: "And by 'government' I mean the set of institutions and practices by which people are 'led,' from administration to education, etc. It is this set of procedures, techniques, and methods that guarantee the 'government' of people, which seems to me to be in crisis today." Michel Foucault and Ducio Trombadori, *Remarks on Marx*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (NY: Semiotext(e), 1991), 176. I will return to Foucault's account of the intellectual in this interview in the subsequent section of this essay.

⁷Michel Senellart, "Course Context" in Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 370.

⁸Senellart, "Course Context," 370.

April of 1978 and is sent to Iran by the Italian newspaper *Corriere della serra* in the fall of 1978, so it seems reasonable to surmise that we would find some connections between the material in the lecture course and Foucault's writings on Iran.

Governmentality plays various roles in Foucault's Iranian writings, though never a central one. I shall focus on two instances where Foucault uses the term in ways that indicate its growing significance in his work during this period. But first, a few words about one of the common criticisms of these texts: it has often been claimed that Foucault fails to adequately understand the Iranian Revolution on its own terms but instead imposes categories from his own European frame of reference upon these events.⁹ This criticism is true to a certain extent; furthermore, such a practice is likely unavoidable for someone who lacks expertise in these fields. Nevertheless, it does not follow that Foucault is the latest in a long line of European thinkers engaging in an Orientalist project to understand the Middle Eastern and Asian cultures in European terms, nor is he dazzled by the exotic sights he witnesses in Iran. Rather his claims concerning parallels between, say, power relations in European contexts and cross-cultural parallels to places such as Iran or Japan remain invariably probing and tentative. Connections between his work and what he witnesses in Tehran or Qom are not dogmatically asserted but instead remain searching and hypothetical.

Stuart Elden has recently traced the chronology of Foucault's work during this period, and he reminds us that Foucault concluded *Security, Territory, Population* in April 1978 and then proceeded to travel to Japan, where he gave two lectures and visited a Zen monastery.¹⁰

⁹This is one of the main critiques advanced by Afary and Anderson. However, they manage to mangle Foucault's thought so thoroughly that this criticism loses some of its force. They freely state that they read Foucault's genealogical method itself becomes "a suprahistorical grand narrative" that "privileges not modernity but the traditional social orders." *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 13-14.

¹⁰Stuart Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016), 101: "It ['Sexuality and Power,' one of the two lectures Foucault gave in Japan] closes with a return to the theme of



Elden suggests we read these lectures as well as many of his Iranian writings as attempts to test whether his re-conceived notion of power as governmentality has anything like cross-cultural validity. He is not attempting to impose this schema upon other cultural conceptions of power, but rather determining whether it can be applied. And this is a useful way to approach the Iran texts as well: Foucault is testing a hypothesis in order to see whether his conception of power as government (as “the conduct of conduct”) provides something more than merely a European matrix for understanding power relations.¹¹

As evidence, we can first consider this reference to government found in “Tehran: Faith Against the Shah”: “I do not feel comfortable,” Foucault writes, “speaking of Islamic government as an ‘idea’ or even an ‘ideal.’ Rather, it impressed me as a form of ‘political will.’ It impressed me in its effort to politicize structures that are inseparably social and religious in response to current problems. It also impressed me in its attempt to open a spiritual dimension in politics.”¹² Readers are often puzzled by the introduction of the term “political spirituality” in these texts; Foucault employs the term here to characterize this distinctive form of government introduced in Iran by the revolutionaries, a form of government that was developed through opposition to the Shah. That is, Islamic government was

pastoral power, which is of principal interest for its relation to Feudalism within Europe and Confucianism in the East. On this trip Foucault also spent time in a Zen temple, clearly fascinated by the rituals and rules, in which he saw both parallels and distinctions from Christian monasticism and mysticism.”

¹¹Ian Almond does a good job of capturing Foucault’s ambivalence toward non-European societies (indeed, often ambivalence can be indistinguishable from tentativeness). He claims that Foucault wants to critique the otherness of Islam at the same time that he surreptitiously employs it. “On the one hand, like Nietzsche, Foucault will always be aware of ‘the thousand-year old reproach of fanaticism’ that has been directed at Islam and the perennial outsider status it has been given by the West; on the other, the very European ‘outsiderness’ that Foucault analyses will simultaneously be of *use*. The complexity of Foucault’s approach to the Islamic Other—be it Tunisian demonstrators or Iranian Shiites—lies in this consecutive (at time even concurrent) analysis and appropriation of Islam’s alterity.” *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 22-23.

¹²Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 208.

shaped through opposition, through the counter-conduct that eventually led to the shah's ouster. In other words, Islamic government is a set of concrete practices that politicize domains that had previously been free from governmentalization.

In both *Security, Territory and Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault's concerns lie not only with the innovation and proliferation of arts of government characteristic of modernity, but also with the limitations imposed upon these innovative arts of government, either externally or through self-limitation. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, one of the key differences he emphasizes between previous forms of government and eighteenth century forms of liberalism is that prior to the eighteenth century both innovations in governmentality and limitations on government were imposed from the outside. Liberal and later neoliberal theorists held that government ought to restrict itself. At the end of the eighteenth century, "there is a shift of the center of gravity of public law. The fundamental problem of public law will no longer be the foundation of sovereignty, the conditions of the sovereign's legitimacy, or the conditions under which the sovereign's rights can be exercised legitimately as it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The problem becomes how to set juridical limits to the exercise of power by a public authority."¹³ Liberal governmental rationality consists of self-imposed limits that will ultimately help it achieve its aims through "the management of risk":

A number of consequences follow from this. First, we can say that the motto of liberalism is: "Live dangerously." "Live dangerously," that is to say, individuals are constantly exposed to danger, or rather, they are conditioned to experience their situation, their life, their present, and their future as containing danger. I think this kind of stimulus of danger will be one of the major implications of liberalism. An entire education and culture of danger ap-

¹³Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 39, cf.



pears in the nineteenth century which is very different from those great apocalyptic threats of plague, death, and war which fed the political and cosmological imagination of the Middle Ages, and even of the seventeenth century.¹⁴

Risk is the complement of liberty, and by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the main task of liberal governmentality in Western states had become the management of risk. Individuals and corporations are obliged to assume risk within society, but the truth of liberalism lies in the calculation of that risk. Drawing on the work of neoliberal economists such as Gary Becker, Foucault develops this theme of individual risk in liberalism and neoliberalism later in the lecture course by considering the neoliberal account of crime and the criminal. The criminal is one who “invests in an action, expects a profit from it, and who accepts the risk of a loss.”¹⁵ Consequently, the penal system targets the conduct of the criminal: “It has to concern itself with a conduct or a series of conducts which produce actions from which the actors expect a profit and which carry a special risk, which is not just the risk of economic loss, but the penal risk, or that economic loss which is inflicted by a penal system.” That is, the penal system provides a set of reactions to the “supply of crime.”¹⁶ The management of risk gives rise to various techniques of neoliberal governmentality that develop around the economic calculation of risk, with criminal justice as just one dimension of this economization. In other words, neoliberalism sees everything through an economic lens, and the penal system becomes subject to economic analysis for the first time. Although it may not initially appear so, this conception of governmentality, understood as “the conduct of conduct,” and various forms of resistance (“counter-conducts”) to it,

¹⁴Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 66.

¹⁵Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 253.

¹⁶Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Bernard Harcourt develops Foucault’s sketch of the transformation of criminality under liberal and neoliberal regimes of governmentality in *The Illusion of Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

lies in the background of these writings on the Iranian Revolution.¹⁷

Foucault's claim that Islamic government represents a new form of political will occurs in the final section of his article "What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?" entitled "The Inventors of the State."¹⁸ He concludes the article with four observations, two about the present and two about the relationship between the present and the distant past. First, he remarks that the intensity of this political will precludes a moderate solution, but secondly he also wonders at its depth, whether it is "rooted deeply enough to become a permanent factor in the political life of Iran, or will it dissipate like a cloud when the sky of political reality have finally cleared [...]?" These questions indicate present concerns, but Foucault has deeper concerns that center around state power, governmentality, and resistance; that is, that concern conduct and counter-conduct from a historical perspective. "At the dawn of history, Persia invented the state and conferred its models on Islam. Its administrators staffed the caliphate. But from this same Islam, it derived a religion that gave to its people the power to resist state power."¹⁹ So, Foucault asks, how does the present revolution relate to this longer history of the state and resistance to the state? With the Iranian Revolution, are we witnessing a re-invention of this state, or something new? His second historical question concerns political spirituality: "For the people who inhabit this land, what is the point of searching, even at the cost of their own lives, for this thing whose possibility we have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity, a political spirituality. I can already hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong."²⁰ The crisis of Christianity occurred during the same period as the initial proliferation in arts of government: in both cases, we see a close

¹⁷Governmentality must be understood in terms of conduct: it consists of the techniques whereby the conduct of individuals and groups is conducted. Cf. Corey McCall, "Conduct," *The Foucault Lexicon*, eds. Leonard Lawlor and John Nale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 68-74.

¹⁸Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 208-209.

¹⁹Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 208.

²⁰Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 209.



connection between spiritual matters and governmentality. An Islamic government, in other words, would be one that institutionalizes and governmentalizes political spirituality.

With the exception of Khomeini, Foucault harbors no illusions regarding whether the Shi'ite clergy themselves might constitute a revolutionary vanguard, but he remains open to the possibility that Shi'ism itself can. Foucault detects a split in the opposition, between those he terms “politicians” who believe that Khomeini has no concrete governing program and the people themselves, for whom Khomeini’s charisma, which Foucault characterizes as “a mysterious current that flowed between an old man who had been exiled for fifteen years and his people,” is irresistible.²¹ He notes in several places in these texts that what the world is witnessing is a revolution from below in the name of Islam. Of course, this scrambles the neat Western dichotomy that draws a rigid distinction between revolution and religion, with religion seen as a conservative force within society that seeks to maintain its hold on tradition. One source of this rigid distinction between revolution and religion is Marx himself, who famously claimed that religion was “the opiate of the people,” but another source of it can be found in the Enlightenment legacy of bourgeois humanism that contrasts progress in society in such fields as science, technology, and politics with the benighted realm of religious superstition. One of the things that fascinates Foucault about what he witnessed in Iran was that the revolt against the Shah was in the name of religion: it was a religious revolt that scrambled this neat distinction between religion and revolution.²² Foucault reports that he never once heard the word “revolution.” Instead, the people are

²¹Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 204-205.

²²Melinda Cooper notes this in her essay “The Law of the Household” as well: “Foucault was convinced that something quite extraordinary was at stake here. The revolutionary movement in Iran, he contended, paved a way for a new form of politics, one which escaped the limitations of the two most salient models of revolution in European history—one the one hand, the liberal revolution which had introduced parliamentary democracy, citizenship, and ‘the monstrosity of the state;’ and on the other, Marxist revolution, with its tendency to reduce all conflict to class struggle.” See *The Government of Life*, 34-35.

clamoring for “an Islamic government,” which was what Ayatollah Khomeini repeatedly claimed was the aim of resistance to the Shah as well.²³ Foucault distinguishes two possible meanings for this term. “Islamic government” may mean a “utopia” or, alternatively, “an ideal” that refashions ancient meanings into something qualitatively new. “At any rate, it is something very old and also very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet, but also of advancing toward a luminous and distant point where it would be possible to renew fidelity rather than maintain obedience.”²⁴ In other words, the demand for Islamic government is a demand for the creative renewal of Islam that will transform its current legalism.²⁵ He continues that “it is first and foremost about a movement that aims to give a permanent role in political life to the traditional structures of Islamic society. An Islamic government is what will allow the continuing activity of the thousands of political centers that have been spawned in mosques and religious communities in order to resist the shah’s regime.”²⁶ Foucault gives an example of an earthquake in Ferdows that devastated the city. When the authorities presented their rebuilding plan, it was rejected by the people, who, under the guidance of a religious leader, raised the money to rebuild the city at a nearby site that was dubbed Islamiyeh.²⁷ This is the sort of political creativity at the heart of a revolt focused squarely on a revolutionary transformation of the present.

It is simultaneously this demand for Islamic government and the focus on the present that fascinates Foucault here. While this makes some amount of sense given Foucault’s self-description as an historian of the present, it contrasts markedly with his understanding of European historico-political discourses prior to the nineteenth century. In their recent analysis of Foucault’s work on state and civil soci-

²³Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 205.

²⁴Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 206.

²⁵Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 206.

²⁶Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 207.

²⁷Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 207.

ety, Mitchell Dean and Kaspar Villadsen remind us of this forgetting of the present in eighteenth-century discourses on both state power and the various resistances to it, as documented in Foucault's 1976 course *Society Must Be Defended*:

In the old eighteenth-century historico-political discourse the present is always viewed as a moment of profound forgetfulness. More precisely, the present was understood to be permeated by a complex of shifts and alliances between rival forces that had rendered the fundamental and primitive state of war muddled. The present was negatively valued because the objective was to awaken form or cure oneself from this forgetfulness.²⁸

This nostalgia for a national past changes at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, when thinkers begin to prize the present for its own sake rather than seeing it as a “muddled” moment of oblivion during which the nobility demanded a reawakening of past glories.²⁹ Late eighteenth-century and nineteenth century thinkers become simultaneously more focused on the present and more forward-looking. The European nobles in Foucault's 1975-1976 lecture course sought a return to the archaism of the nation as a way to call into question the legitimacy of the absolutist state. In his last published text, Foucault will claim that it is Kant's focus on the present that marks him as an Enlightenment thinker. Foucault knows that Kant is not the first philosopher to reflect on the present, but he believes that he is the first to reflect on the present on its own terms, and not, as a dimension of world history (Plato), or as a sign pointing to the future (Augustine), or a transition to something new (Vico). Instead, Kant sees the present as an *Ausgang* or exit from self-incurred

²⁸Mitchell Dean and Kaspar Villadsen, *State Phobia and Civil Society: The Political Legacy of Michel Foucault* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 82. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (NY: Picador, 2003), 227: “In the history and historico-political field of the eighteenth century, the present was, basically, always the negative moment. It was always the trough of the wave, always a moment of apparent calm and forgetfulness.”

²⁹Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 227.

immaturity that precludes thinking and acting for oneself, both at the level of the individual and the social.³⁰

This return to Kant in Foucault's late texts seems to have perplexed some readers, but it really shouldn't. After all, Foucault began his intellectual career with the publication of a translation and interpretation of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, and Foucault's various engagements with Kant extend throughout his career.³¹ The next section focuses on one aspect of this engagement. I focus on the conception of intellectual *praxis* that we find in Foucault's engagement with Kant's work in the late 1970s and how it relates to his Iranian writings. Ali Shariati, the thinker who is often cited as the ideological prophet of the Iranian Revolution, will provide my focus.

2. Contesting State Power: Kant, Shariati, and the Risks of Resistance

The question concerning the intellectual's role in modern societies has been a recurring theme throughout Foucault's writings, though this theme manifests itself more in his occasional writings and lecture courses than in his published writings. This is an enduring concern that can be traced to quite early in Foucault's career. For example, "Intellectuals and Power," which is a dialogue between Foucault and Gilles Deleuze conducted in March of 1972, addresses the changing role of the intellectual in modern European societies.³² This piece dates from the pair's involvement with the *Groupe d'information sur les Prisons* (GIP), a loosely-affiliated group of intellectuals and activists who sought to provide French inmates with a platform so that

³⁰Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1: *Ethics*, ed. Paul Rabinow (NY: New Press, 1997), 304-305.

³¹Michel Foucault, *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*, ed. Roberto Nigro (NY: Semiotext(e), 2008). See also Marc Djaballah, *Foucault, Kant, and the Forms of Experience* (London: Routledge, 2011) for an account of Foucault's sustained engagement with Kantian critique throughout his career.

³²Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power," *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (NY: Semiotext(e), 2004).



they could draw attention to the squalid prison conditions in France. It was important to the intellectuals involved that the prisoners be given an opportunity to speak for themselves instead of acting as their representatives. Hence, one of the topics of this dialogue was representation, i.e. an analysis of the various conditions under which the intellectual is authorized to speak on behalf of another.

Foucault has already begun to contest the Marxist conception of the engaged intellectual, according to which the intellectual both speaks on behalf of the exploited proletariat and attempts to get the members of this class to see their wretchedness. By 1972 Foucault sees that this conception of the engaged intellectual, one that extends from Marx and Engels at least through Sartre, was inadequate. He endeavors to replace this Marxist conception of the engaged intellectual who speaks on behalf of others and serves as their representative with the conception of the specific intellectual. Among other things, this individual does not pretend to have privileged knowledge that remains inaccessible to those she represents. Foucault here discusses the role of the intellectual in much the same way that he will some seven years later in his interview with Baqir Parham. He notes that the intellectual's political status in bourgeois society typically stems from two sources: either it results from her position within society, “the position as an intellectual in bourgeois society, in the system of capitalist production, in the ideology which that system produces or imposes” or from the “intellectual discourse itself, in as much as it revealed a particular truth, uncovering political relationships where none were before perceived.”³³ The first reason for politicization of the intellectual is due to the fact that many intellectuals exist on the margins, either ignored or actively persecuted by the authorities. The second reason for the intellectual's politicization within bourgeois society stems from her role as a critic. This figure of the marginalized intellectual who engages in social critique provides the basis both for Foucault's analysis of intellectual counter-conduct (what he with some hesitation labels “dissent” in *Security, Territory, Population*)

³³Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power,” 207.

and his understanding of the political role that the intellectual plays in the Iranian Revolution. This is most evident in his understanding of the significance of Ali Shariati as a prophet of the Revolution, whom Foucault characterizes in startlingly Kantian terms.

One of the most important continuities between *Security, Territory, Population* and Foucault's other writings during this period can be found in his attempt to develop this insight from 1972 and his work with the GIP that intellectuals are always imbricated in the political. Despite various attempts to tenaciously cling to an apolitical, objective stance that remains above the fray, intellectual labor always has specific political implications. This is put most succinctly in Foucault's re-conception of philosophy at the beginning of the *Security, Territory, Population* lectures that philosophy ought to be understood as "the politics of truth." As I noted above, Foucault begins the lecture course by claiming that his aim for that year will be the study of biopower, though he quickly becomes ensnared first in the study of governmentality and then of pastoral power as the antecedent of modern arts of government. He begins by presenting a series of "indications" or "principles of intent" regarding where he hopes the investigation of biopower that year will lead. After noting that these indications will neither yield a general definition of power relations nor a conception of power as an essence that exists independently of the relations constituting it. He concedes that the analysis may indeed lead to a general analysis of society, but that possibility will not guide him. Rather, this project is a philosophical one, provided that we understand philosophy as "the politics of truth," that is a discipline whose "role is showing the knowledge effects produced by the struggles, confrontations, and battles that take place within our society, and by the tactics of power that are the elements of that struggle."³⁴ Indeed, he seems here to be taking up Deleuze's suggestion in "Intellectuals and Power" that theories be seen as tools in a tool box, or, as Foucault says in 1972, that theory be seen as a "local and regional" *praxis*:

³⁴Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 2-3.



A struggle against power, a struggle to bring power to light and open up where it is most invisible and insidious. Not a struggle for some ‘insight’ or ‘realization’ (for a long time consciousness as knowledge has been acquired by the masses, and consciousness as subjectivity has been taken, occupied by the bourgeoisie)—but a struggle to undermine and take power side by side with those who are fighting, and not of to the side trying to enlighten them. A ‘theory’ is the regional system of this struggle.³⁵

The intellectual remains immanent within society and not a privileged member of it. Furthermore, society is here understood as a site of struggle that forms the basis for state power and its technologies of government. Hence the problem with treating the intellectual as an authoritative prophet is that this status assumes privileged knowledge that she would share if only her fellow members of society would listen. Foucault underscores this position in a series of interviews he gave with the Italian Marxist journalist Ducio Trombadori after his return from Iran at the end of 1978. In the final interview, included in the 1991 collection *Remarks on Marx* as “The Discourse on Power,” Foucault makes his reservations regarding the modern intellectual’s role within society plain. Trombadori attempts to get Foucault to admit that the intellectual has some general political role to play in society, and Foucault responds:

My role is to address problems effectively, really: and to pose them with the greatest possible rigor, with the maximum complexity and difficulty so that a solution does not arise all at once because of the thought of some reformer or even in the brain of a political party. The problems that I try to address, these perplexities of crime, madness, and sex which involve daily life, cannot be easily resolved. It takes years, decades of work carried out at the grassroots level with the people directly involved; and the right to speech and political imagination must be returned to them.³⁶

³⁵Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power,” 207-208.

³⁶Michel Foucault and Ducio Trombadori, *Remarks on Marx*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (NY: Semiotext(e), 1991), 158-159.

The intellectual's task is direct involvement "at the grassroots level." Instead of speaking on behalf of people due to the peculiar authority of the intellectual, the intellectual must work to restore what the people have lost, the right to speech and political imagination. Foucault continues: "I carefully guard against making the law. Rather, I concern myself with determining problems, unleashing them, revealing them within the framework of such complexity as to shut the mouths of prophets and legislators: all those who speak *for* others and *above* others."³⁷ This concern with speaking for others and its attendant problems of representation and misrepresentation had already been addressed in the 1972 interview, and Foucault remains concerned with it here. In his conversation with Trombadori, Foucault seems to categorically deny that the intellectual any prophetic role. However, if we return to the Iranian writings, we see that Foucault's emphasis on political imagination and the right to speech (what he will subsequently term *parresia*) render this condemnation of intellectual prophecy less categorical. While he never advocates the view that the intellectual be seen simply as a prophet, once we examine what he has to say about Iranian intellectuals in general and Ali Shariati in particular we can surmise that Foucault would likely endorse this qualified sense of immanent intellectual prophecy—the intellectual as a specific prophet rather than a general one.

In his discussion with Trombadori, Foucault's main worry about understanding the intellectual in terms of a prophet or a legislator is that these conceptions provide the intellectual with prescriptive authority. According to these two conceptions, the intellectual does not simply analyze and describe how things are; in addition, she assumes a position of authority that makes it possible for her to render the phenomena or actors involved in her social analyses and critiques as objects of research who must submit to her authority and in whose name she speaks. There is another worry here, though, and it is this worry that provides the basis for a modified conception of the prophetic intellectual, one not subject to Foucault's reservations. The typical prophetic

³⁷Foucault and Trombadori, *Remarks on Marx*, 159.



intellectual is able to secure a position that minimizes her risk, one that might be literal or figurative. For example, a professor employed by a university generally assumes fewer risks than the intellectual who is not part of such an institutional setting. The intellectual might find a way to comment on events (on a blog or in the media) and thereby avoid becoming implicated in the social events that occasion her analysis thus remaining above the fray. So, does Foucault offer us a way for the intellectual to be both prophetic and assume the risks borne by individuals who lack the intellectuals' various institutional advantages?

An adequate answer to this question would require a fuller examination of Foucault's lectures on *parresia* during the final years of his life than I will be able to provide here.³⁸ Instead, I would like to examine two moments that anticipate his later work on *parresia*. In addition to contributing to an account of the development of this idea in Foucault's work, it will also help us to see the role of the prophetic intellectual in Foucault's writings on Iran. I will begin with Foucault's remarks on the intellectual found in his interview with Baqir Parham. I conclude by discussing Foucault's remarks on Ali Shariati as an exemplar of the prophetic intellectual who risked speaking out against a tyrannical government.

Foucault begins his dialogue with Parham by reiterating his claim that one's status as an intellectual entails political engagement, but he rejects previous attempts to define the intellectual in purely theoretical or objective terms.³⁹ The salient question, then, is what sort of relationship to politics the intellectual ought to have: will it be characterized by the intellectual's attempts to remain aloof from en-

³⁸Minimally, an engagement with Foucault's 1981-1982 lecture course *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and his final lecture course from 1983-1984, *The Courage of Truth*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Finally, his Berkeley lectures from the fall of 1983 published as *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (NY: Semiotext(e), 2001) provide a succinct statement of the meaning and significance of *parresia*.

³⁹Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 183.

gagement, or will she embrace it? And, if she embraces it, then how best to do so? Since the French Revolution, Foucault claims, the intellectual has “played the role of a prophet, a foreteller of the future society. In other words, the intellectual was one whose responsibility was to deal with general and universal principles for all of humanity.”⁴⁰ Due to various changes in modern society, this pretension to speak on behalf of all humanity has been undermined. He continues: “In my opinion, today the intellectual must be inside the pit, the very pit in which the sciences are engaged, where they produce political results.”⁴¹ It is necessary, Foucault claims, to begin anew, “to construct another political thought, another political vision, and teach a new vision of the future.”⁴² In other words, the intellectual’s task remains oriented to the future, but a specific future in which she can no longer speak for all. This is how Foucault understands his role in Iran, and it is how he characterizes the role of Ali Shariati.

Foucault characterizes Ali Shariati as the intellectual hero of the Revolution. In “Tehran: Faith Against the Shah,” Foucault writes about Ali Shariati in a way that anticipates his formulation of the Kantian present as an *Ausgang* or exit in his final writings. Shariati dies in June of 1977, but his work provides the basis for Foucault’s conception of political spirituality. Indeed, Foucault claims that the present is haunted by the spirit of Ali Shariati. In terms that echo the famous opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto* (“A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism”), Foucault characterizes Shariati as the ghost that haunts Iran today:

But one dreams also of another movement, which is the inverse and converse of the first [i.e. an Islamic government]. This is one that allow the introduction of a spiritual dimension into political life, in order that it would not be, as always, the obstacle to spirituality, but rather its receptacle, its opportunity, and its ferment. This is where we encounter a shadow that haunts all political and

⁴⁰Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 184.

⁴¹Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 184.

⁴²Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 185.

religious life in Iran today: that of Ali Shariati, whose death two years ago gives him the position, so privileged in Shi'ism, of the invisible Present, of the ever-present Absent.⁴³

Shariati defines the present for a Shi'ism in revolt, just as Kant had defined the Enlightenment for liberal Europe two centuries before. Furthermore, Shariati constitutes a public outside the university through his teaching. Foucault continues: "His 'luck' was that persecution forced him to go to Tehran and to have to teach outside of the university, in a room prepared for him under the protection of a mosque. There, he addressed a public that was his, and that could soon be counted in the thousands: students, mullahs, intellectuals, modest people from the neighborhood of the bazaar, and people passing through from the provinces."⁴⁴ The distinction Foucault draws here between a life devoted to university teaching and one devoted to a public one constitutes oneself echoes the distinction that Kant drew between the private and public use of reason. Private reason is constrained by another, while public reason permits one to speak unfettered, in one's own voice.

In May 1978, Foucault gives a lecture at the Sorbonne entitled "What is Critique?" In this lecture, he gives a first sketch of what he terms here "the critical attitude" from the beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and extending through Kant and the European Enlightenment.⁴⁵ The significance of this critical attitude can only be understood in light of Christian pastoral power in which "every individual, whatever his age or his 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 [...] by someone to whom he is bound in a total, and at the same time meticulous and

⁴³Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 207.

⁴⁴Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 208.

⁴⁵Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 382.

detailed, relation of obedience.”⁴⁶ This is a summary of the genealogy of modern governmentality that Foucault had just traced from its roots in the Middle Ages administration of obedience in *Security, Territory, Population*. Modernity witnesses “a veritable explosion” of these arts of governing. What had been limited to the institutional site of the monastic life became both widespread throughout society and unmoored from its religious context.⁴⁷ This laicization and proliferation of the arts of government prompt individuals and groups to find ways to avoid this governmentalizing tendency in society. The question in a wide variety of both sacred and secular contexts becomes, “How not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of these principles, in view of such objectives and b the means of such methods, not like that, not for that, not by them.”⁴⁸ This “art of not being governed so much” is the essence of the critical attitude. Foucault next provides three examples: the European Protestant refusal of the governing Church hierarchy, refusal of sovereign power in the name of natural rights, and questioning authority. “I will say that critique is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth.”⁴⁹

This implicit association of Shariati with European Enlightenment critique becomes less jarring once we recall that Foucault characterizes his account of *parresia* in *Fearless Speech* as a genealogy of the critical attitude, “concerned with the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth, we have the roots of what we could call the ‘critical’ tradition in the West. And here you will recognize one of my targets in this seminar, namely, to construct a genealogy of the critical attitude in Western philosophy.”⁵⁰ Foucault and Shariati

⁴⁶Foucault, “What is Critique?” 383.

⁴⁷Foucault, “What is Critique?” 383-384.

⁴⁸Foucault, “What is Critique?” 384.

⁴⁹Foucault, “What is Critique?” 385.

⁵⁰Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 170-171.

both realized that critique properly understood is the political work to imagine other futures than the one that seems given.