

Foucault and Epicureanism of the Iranian Revolution

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Introduction

Following Hegel and Marx, many students of the history of modern philosophy have called Immanuel Kant the philosopher of the French Revolution.¹ They claim “it was the French Revolution that activated the latent *political dimension of Kant’s philosophy...*”² Similarly, there are students of modern Iran who argue that the Iranian Revolution activated the latent political dimension of Michel Foucault’s thought, although they may disagree on the content, meaning, and scope of that dimension.³ Rather than resolving the problem of

¹Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 36.

²Fehér Ferenc, ed., *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1990), 204.

³Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

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whether or not the Iranian Revolution activated the latent political dimension of Foucault's thought, this article examines Foucault's complex relation to Marx and Marxism as the backdrop of his response to the Iranian Revolution.

Foucault ascribed a grandiose significance to the Iranian Revolution, but he can barely help us understand the nature of this revolution, its politico-intellectual underpinnings or its local and international significance. Rather than the process of subjectivity and moments of subjectivation, Foucault's concern was subjectification, a process through which individuals are constituted as subjects whose subjectivities are expressed through objectification, exclusion, and marginalization of the other. Rather than revolutionary consciousness or the science of revolution revealing the dominant ideology, Foucault deals with how these seemingly opposite theoretical stances are part of epistemic knowledge and discursive practices of every period. After his first book in 1954,⁴ Foucault had never been interested in any systematic investigations of what erroneously or correctly is considered as emancipatory politics. Rather than politics and individual and collective emancipation, he is concerned with power and government of the individual and people. However, he saw the Iranian Revolution as a possible opening toward a full-fledged emancipatory politics against the existing government of the individual and people locally and globally. Foucault was perhaps the last great European intellectual who was convinced of the existence of an "us" constituted by a common history toward a common destiny. He described the Iranian Revolution as an uprising against "the weight of the entire world," and as "perhaps the first great resurrection against a planetary system, the most modern form of revolt."⁵ This description implies the universality of an "us" in need of revolutionary leadership to transform it into a global "we."⁶ Whereas Foucault was "discover-

⁴Michel Foucault, *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954).

⁵Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (London: Faber&Faber, 1992), 287.

⁶Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 261-262.

ing” this Revolution as an opening toward a “great transformation,” European Marxists, as masters of universal solidarity, failed to employ the simplest method of theoretical universalization to locate the Revolution within our common humanity and destiny as the concrete transformation of the *us* into the *we* in this event.

In the early 1950s, without knowing Marx very well, Foucault became a Marxist.⁷ A decade later, while Louis Althusser, his former teacher, was promoting Marx’s science of history as an epistemological break with ideology,⁸ Foucault was arguing that Marxism was a product of the nineteenth century epistemological arrangement.⁹ Again, more than a decade later, Foucault saw the Iranian Revolution as verification of his intellectual convergence with Marx’s thought. My contention in this article is that while this universal *us* had always been present in Foucault’s work, it was in the 1970s that he realized that his *us* was the same as Marx’s *us*. But what Marx did and Foucault had never done, the inference of a revolutionary *we* from *us*. Unlike Althusser’s return to Marx through a rigorous reading of his work, Foucault’s return to Marx is very peculiar. He returns to the sources that shaped the universal *us* in Marx, i.e., Epicurus and the Epicurean tradition of thought. Foucault claims, in his later studies, that the rule know yourself (*gnothi seauton*) is subordinated to the principle of care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*).¹⁰ This claim is an endorsement of Marx’s reading of Epicurus, who in turn dealt with the dilemma that Democritus had experienced, “The knowledge that he considers true is without content, the knowledge that gives him content is without truth.”¹¹

⁷Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversation with Duccio Trombadori* (New York: Semiotext(e) 1991), 51.

⁸Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 82-83.

⁹Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

¹⁰Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-82* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005), 11-12.

¹¹Karl Marx, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (PhD. diss.), Part I, section on *Difficulties Concerning the Identity of the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, https://archive.org/stream/Marx_Karl.

In the process of reconciliation with the Epicurean Marx, Foucault understood the Iranian revolution within the planetary system in the same way that Epicurus understood atoms within the straight line, as both elements and principles, with the capacity for deviation and attraction expressing their individuality and universality.¹² First, I discuss Foucault's fascination with Marxism. Second, I examine his apparent departure from Marxism. Finally, with emphasis on 1978-1982 lectures, I examine his return to Marxism.

I. Alienation and De-alienation

Until the late early 1940s, rather than an intellectual factor Marxism remained a political force in France. Describing the late 1940s' French philosophical mode, Althusser claims, "Our philosophers had Descartes and self-evidence on their side, the simple act of the lucid mind, and 'the great tradition of French Philosophy.'"¹³ While not taking Hegelian philosophy seriously, this "great philosophical tradition" saw Marxism as a perverted version of Hegelianism. In the early 1950s, thanks to a new generation of French thinkers interested in Hegel, phenomenology and Marx, the French intellectual scene was entirely changed. For the young students and teachers of philosophy such as Foucault, Françoise Lyotard, and Louise Althusser, the question of truth had become "a question of history."¹⁴ Lyotard would argue "truth is defined in its becoming, as the revision, correction, and surpassing of itself- a dialectical operation which always takes place within the living present (*lebendige Gegenwart*)."¹⁵ To liberate the subject from the transcendental presuppositions that excluded historical time and concrete social reality, these young French intellectuals challenged the Cartesian thinking subject through the Hegelian-phenomenological conception of truth. In their academic

¹²Marx, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, Part II, Ch. I, section on *The Declination of the Atom from the Straight Line*.

¹³Louise Althusser, *The Spectre of Hegel* (London: Verso, 1997), 173.

¹⁴Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 63.

¹⁵Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 64.

and public life, these young students and teachers had the backing of a new generation of French interpretative authorities including Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Hyppolite,¹⁶ Maurice Merleau Ponty, George Canguilhem¹⁷ and Georges Bataille. These interpretative authorities had received their philosophical training from Alexander Kojeve's *Lectures on Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind* (1936-1939). The interest in Hegel's phenomenology was followed by a passion for Marx's conception of history, the dialectics of master and slave, the concept of labor, alienation, self and class-consciousness and class-struggle. For Sartre, Descartes-Locke and Kant-Hegel represented two significant moments of modern philosophy. But Marx was the culmination of this philosophy. Sartre wrote: "These three philosophies become, each in its turn, the humus of every particular thought and the horizon of all culture; there is no going beyond them so long as man has not gone beyond the historical moment which they express."¹⁸ Through Hegel, the new generation of French thinkers began to see the great philosophical value of Marx's conceptualization of history, labor, and alienation. They learned from Hegel and Marx that the subject was more than "an abstract epistemological placeholder" that attained true knowledge, but a "human being rooted in the social, political and historical world."¹⁹ With Hegel came Heidegger who argued that the possibility of knowledge depends on the subject that produces its object.²⁰ Heidegger conceptualization of existence as "an activity of endless transcendence" implies the reliance of man's essence on his existence,²¹ which calls into question the essential self or *cogito* and constitutes the subject within his socio-historical world. Whereas the

¹⁶Hyppolite's *studies on Hegel and Marx* exerted immense influence on Foucault and he inherited Hyppolite's Chair of The History of Philosophical Thought at the *Collège de France*.

¹⁷Canguilhem, who had mentored the most celebrated French thinkers of 20th century such as Althusser and Derrida, remained Foucault's soul defender when he was under attack in the late 1960s.

¹⁸T.Rockmore, *Heidegger and The French Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 23.

¹⁹Rockmore, *Heidegger and The French Philosophy*, 48.

²⁰Rockmore, *Heidegger and The French Philosophy*, 50.

²¹R.Kerney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 31.

subject's self-understanding depends on his understanding of his socio-historical world, his actions are not predetermined by this world. The subject's capacity to interpret his inherited situation enables him to project a new future, liberated from the limits of his present situation. Thus, man's interpretation becomes the guardian angel of his freedom enabling him to decide the courses of his actions toward his own and his society's freedom. Reflecting on his youth, Foucault claims that the intellectual horizon of his generation as students was limited by "Marxism, phenomenology, and existentialism."²² This limited intellectual horizon, shaped by the existentialist Marxism, inspires the young Foucault to develop an existential-psychology as a theoretical base for the advancement of psychiatry. He hopes that his existential-psychology plays the same role in psychiatry, that physiology has played in medicine: "Or, la psychologie n'a jamais pu offrir à la psychiatrie ce que la physiologie a donné à la médecine."²³

Toward an Existential-Psychology

In his *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (1954), Foucault studies the conditions under which an illness is defined as mental illness and examines types of relationship which can be established between mental and organic pathology.²⁴ He argues that there is no similarity between illness of the body and mental illness, because whereas the body can be decomposed into its elements, the spirit constitutes a whole.²⁵ Hubert Dreyfus writes in his comments on Foucault's *Mental Illness and Psychology*: "In Foucault's accounts, social contradiction causes alienation, alienations causes mental defenses, defenses cause brain malfunction, and brain malfunction causes abnormal behaviour."²⁶ The book Dreyfus is commenting on is a complete revi-

²²Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel* (London: Continuum, 2000), 176.

²³Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 13.

²⁴Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 1.

²⁵Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 12.

²⁶Michel Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology* (California: University of California Press 1987), XVI.

sion of *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, published in 1962. However, according to the main thesis of the original book which is maintained in the revised version, awareness of social contradictions will lead to eradication of social alienation, and thus the disappearance of psychological alienation and mental illness. But since society refuses to relate mental illness to its own contradictions, it turns on the mentally ill individuals, alienates them from their fellow human beings, deprives them of their social, legal, and human rights, and then subjects them to the power of the doctors.²⁷ For Foucault, the behavior of the mentally ill is both the expression of his social existence and a protest against the condition of his existence, which reduces him to a mere thing, an object of observation and analysis. In this way, mental illness is a defense mechanism against social contradictions producing social and psychological alienation.²⁸ This means, the social alienation of the mentally ill is not a result of his or her illness, but the source of his mental illness. Thus, the healing of the mentally ill depends on whether his or her social environment is free from contradictions or not.²⁹ The task of psychology is uncovering of the existing interconnections between the state of man's alienation and his socio-historical reality as the context within which he develops his pathological behavior toward mental illness. Foucault aspires to make this existential psychology a true science and a theory of emancipation from mental alienation.³⁰ He challenges psychoanalysis' construction of mental illness as the expression of the mentally ill's failure to deal with his reality. He argues that psychoanalysis' conceptualization of mental illness prevents the mentally ill to make any efforts to understand his illness as a phenomenon within the existing social practices and historical conditions. Psychoanalysis deprives the mentally ill to discover that his illness is an expression of the contradictions within the real condition of or his or her existence while presenting this reality as normal and instructs the mentally ill

²⁷Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 15-16.

²⁸Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 101-104.

²⁹Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 108.

³⁰Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 110.

to come to terms with the existing environment.³¹ What psychoanalysis forgets, according to Foucault is that it is the alienated reality which hides itself in the consciousness of the mentally ill.³² Foucault explains schizophrenia, for instance, as a result of man's experience of a self that has inaccurate consciousness of the social life and its contradictions, of the economic exploitation and class-struggles. Schizophrenia is a consequence of a world which forces man to produce new technologies but does not allow him to see these products as the result of his own activities. Otherwise man could exert his control over the way these technologies function.³³ "Le monde contemporain rend possible la schizophrénie non [pas] parce que ses techniques le rendent inhumain et abstrait; mais parce que l'homme fait de ses techniques, un tel usage que l'homme lui-même ne peut plus s'y reconnaître."³⁴ Since Foucault considers his psychology of alienation to be a continuation of Marx's theory of alienation, he situates mental illness between the experience of the contradictions of the existing reality and the consciousness of these contradictions.

II. Alienation as a Construct

In 1961, seven years after the publication of *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, Foucault publishes his groundbreaking book *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. In 1962, he publishes *Maladie mentale et psychologie*, a revision of *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, which includes a summary of *Folie et déraison*. Whereas in the original version, hospitalization of the mentally ill is regarded as the expression of his or her legal alienation, deprivation of all freedom and rights that a normal person enjoys, in the revised version, the institutionalization of madness becomes the "scientific field" or the condition of possibility of psychiatric practice. Foucault seeks, in the original version, a better understanding of the relationship between the state of social alienation and mental illness to defend the

³¹Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 106-109.

³²Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 110.

³³Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 86.

³⁴Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 89.

rights of those confined in the hospitals. But in the revised version, he investigates how psychiatric practices used confinement and hospitalization as a mean of silencing the voice of the mad to establish psychiatry as a scientific discourse on mental illness. Whereas in the first version, Foucault tries to constitute psychology as the theoretical base of psychiatry to recognize mental illness as the expression of a society alienated from itself, in the second version he tries to remind psychology and psychiatry of their historicity. In 1963, Foucault does a similar historiography on somatic medicine.³⁵

The second version of *Maladie Mentale* indicates Foucault's change of focus from the social and psychological condition of the emancipation of the mentally ill to mapping the institutional process preventing his integration into the society and reducing him to the object of knowledge of the doctor. Foucault's departure from Marxism rests on this move from looking at mental illness as a reality whose precise and objective characteristics guarantee the truth of its conceptualization, to looking at it as a construct whose "scientific conceptualization" is constituted and validated by particular social and discursive practices. By focusing on the historicity of the concept of mental illness and challenging the claim of its universal validity, Foucault distances himself from Marxism. He argues that, because of their failure to participate in the process of "production, circulation, or accumulation of wealth," since the middle of 17th century, the mad, the poor, the unemployed, the sick and the libertine were considered a threat to society. As a result, they were subject to exclusion and confinement.³⁶ After the French Revolution, the mad individual was separated from this dangerous group and subjected to moral rehabilitation to develop his dependency, his sense of guilt, his gratitude and humbleness supposed to be the characteristics of the normal feeling.³⁷ For Foucault, whereas psychology claims to have shown the truth of madness, the history of madness reveals the truth of psycholo-

³⁵Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la Clinique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).

³⁶Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, 67-68.

³⁷Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, 73.

gy.³⁸ Despite Foucault's attempt to go beyond the phenomenological and Marxist interpretation of madness and their conceptualization of mental illness, he remains faithful to what Paul Ricoeur called the hermeneutics of suspicion as uncovering of a state of reality that covers up the truth of that reality.³⁹ But Foucault's remarks, in 1966, on Marxism, made him an enemy of Marxism.

At the deepest level of Western knowledge, Marxism introduced no real discontinuity; it found its place without difficulty as a full, quite comfortable and, goodness knows, satisfying form for a time (its own), within an epistemological arrangement that welcomed it gladly (since it was this arrangement that was in fact making room for it) and that it, in return, had no intention of disturbing and, above all no power to modify, even one jot, since it rested entirely upon it.⁴⁰

Sartre wrote in response to Foucault: "Marxism is the target, it is a matter of establishing a new ideology, the final dam that the bourgeoisie can erect against Marx."⁴¹ Foucault's response to Sartre, came as a comment on his *La Critique de la raison dialectique*, as "the magnificent effort of a nineteenth-century man to conceive of the twentieth century. In this sense, Sartre is the last Hegelian, and even, I would say the last Marxist."⁴² He claims in an interview after the publication of *The Order of Things*, that unlike Sartre's generation that "had a passion for life, politics and existence" his generation has a passion for concepts or systems.⁴³ Through his historical investigations Foucault becomes aware of the fact that "Before any human existence, there would already be a discursive knowledge, a system that we will rediscover."⁴⁴ However, Althusser who shared Foucault's passion for concepts and systems remains Marxist and assumes that Foucault mistakes "humanist Marxism" or Hegelian

³⁸Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, 74.

³⁹Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.

⁴⁰Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 261-262.

⁴¹Eribon, *Foucault*, 164.

⁴²Eribon, *Foucault*, 161.

⁴³Eribon, *Foucault*, 161.

⁴⁴Eribon, *Foucault*, 161.

Marxism for real or scientific Marxism.⁴⁵ *An Archeology of the Human Sciences* as the subtitle, *The Order of Things* is meant to remind us that beneath the old city, that may be the object of our history, there might be an archaic city ready to be discovered, the disappearance of which was the condition of the appearance of that old city.⁴⁶ Thus, the knowledge of the archeological is the condition of possibility of the knowledge of the historical. Foucault's archeological approach to human sciences is an investigation of the epistemological field or the epistemic criteria which determine what counts as knowledge and what does not in every period. A new episteme is never a continuation and development of the previous episteme toward the truth, but a discontinuation of and a rupture with the previous episteme or epistemological field. Foucault defines episteme as "the total set of relations that unites, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures..."⁴⁷ The archeological level of knowledge or episteme is the condition of possibility of conceptual knowledge. For instance, the episteme of the renaissance determines that the world is occupied by signs in need of interpretation. To know in this episteme means to interpret.⁴⁸ Hence, the episteme of the classical age (the seventeenth and eighteenth century) affirms dependence of knowledge on the table as a means of representation and comparison through decomposition of a body into simple elements and its reconstruction into more complex combinations.⁴⁹ According to this episteme, God created the world and expected man to discover its order through representation, which he obeys and uses language to represent things according to their allocated places in the world. The episteme of the classical age was about the discovery of the laws of nature as the foundation of knowledge; it was about the intersection of "nature and human nature." Classical episteme did not generate a "science of man," because human beings were absent from the table of representation.⁵⁰

⁴⁵Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, 28.

⁴⁶Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 111.

⁴⁷Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (London Routledge 1995), 191.

⁴⁸Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 26-31.

⁴⁹Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 74-75.

⁵⁰Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 311.

Man had to wait for the modern episteme to design language as a theory of signification to constitute him as both the subject and object of his knowledge, namely the condition of possibility of the Hegelian and Marx's discourses. Whereas in the pre-modern epistemes man saw himself as an object among others objects, his new position as the subject and object of his knowledge in the modern episteme enables man to discover his capacity to change his place vis-à-vis others worldly objects. In the modern episteme, language indicates man's finitude and limitation to grasp the truth of the world. This limitation leads man to both accept the world as it is and discover its hidden possibilities, through a search for the origin and analysis of his mode of being. "It is in the analysis of that mode of being," which man becomes the philosophical foundation of modern knowledge.⁵¹ As a representative of the modern episteme, Kant clarifies not only man's finitude with regard to space and time, but also his "empirico-transcendental" character whose search for origin creates the condition of possibility of history.⁵² It is within the discourse on the "empirico-transcendental" character of man that Hegelian phenomenology examines the transformation of in itself into for itself, and Marx examines man's transformation from his current alienation to his future de-alienation.⁵³ Foucault argues that Marx's concept of history based on his conceptualization of labor as "the real production of real life,"⁵⁴ does not question the concept of man upon which the idealist philosophy rests.⁵⁵ By man, Foucault means the subject and object of knowledge, the supposed maker of his own history. This "man" is, for Foucault, a result of the modern arrangement of knowledge, "an invention of recent dates" which may disappear when a new arrangement of knowledge appears.⁵⁶

Contrary to Althusser's distinction between science and ideology,

⁵¹Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 335.

⁵²Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 330-331.

⁵³Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 327.

⁵⁴Karl Marx, *Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), 138.

⁵⁵Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 322.

⁵⁶Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 387.

Foucault argues that science has no privilege over ideology because it is the modern episteme, which determines what counts as ideology or science. Surprisingly, Althusser describes *The Order of Things* as a contribution to a general theory of ideology.⁵⁷ This remark receives a response from Foucault in the early 1970s when he distinguishes between the Marxism of “Althusser and his brave comrades” from the Marxism of the French Communist Party.⁵⁸ Foucault’s academic work in the 1970s which includes *The Order of Discourse* (1970), *Discipline and Punishment* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality: Part One* (1976), could be understood as reconciliatory moves toward the anti-bureaucratic Marxism of Althusser and Sartre despite the long distance between their theoretical presuppositions.

III. The Iranian Revolution and the Universal Transformation

As the Iranian Revolution was reaching its peak, at the end of 1978, Foucault gave a long interview to Duccio Trombadori, a journalist from *L’Unità*, the Italian Communist Party’s newspaper. When he is reminded that he had been absent from the political debates in the 1960s, Foucault claims his absence from those debates does not make him less experienced politically. He refers to the student movement in Tunisia in the late 1960s as a valuable political lesson and the main source of his political experience, which taught him, that every political movement should be situated within a global perspective and dealt with in relation to what is happening in other parts of the world.⁵⁹ The Tunisian students, and young men and women who exposed themselves to serious dangers of being murdered, tortured or imprisoned for the simplest political acts such as writing or distributing a leaflet, or advocating student strikes in the late 1960s, were the most valuable political experience of Foucault’s life.⁶⁰ These young Tunisian students who were mostly Marxist taught him that a different Marxism is possible, a Marxism that was totally different from

⁵⁷Macey, *The Lives of Foucault*, 197.

⁵⁸Macey, *The Lives of Foucault*, 171.

⁵⁹Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 133.

⁶⁰Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 134.

the French academic Marxism of the early 1960s and the Marxism of the socialist countries which he had witnessed while staying in Poland. He argues that the Marxism of these young Tunisians was astonishingly radical, violent, intense, spectacular and real because Marxism was for them not only a means of analyzing reality but “a kind of moral force, an existential act that left one stupefied.”⁶¹ Foucault argues that the dissimilarity between the domesticated Western and East-European Marxism and the Tunisian way of being Marxist convinced him to take an interest in the political debate again. “It wasn’t May of ’68 in France that changed me; it was March of ’68, in a third-world country.”⁶²

The interview with Trombadori is taking place after Foucault’s first visit to Iran and after the publication of his most debated article regarding the Iranian revolution, *What are the Iranians dreaming about?*⁶³ A few months earlier, in September 1978, he describes the revolutionary movement in Iran the embodiment of the “political will” and the expression of the “political spirituality” of the Iranian people. However, Foucault does not mention Iran in the interview. Trombadori’s reason for the interview is that after “a decade of an almost uninterrupted enthusiasm for Marxist “language,” many people are circulating Foucault’s vocabulary on “micro-physics of power,”⁶⁴ which challenges the emancipatory claim of the Marxist discourse.⁶⁵ Foucault claims in the interview that he “had only produced a history of power.”⁶⁶ As mentioned above, Foucault’s new interests in politics is a result of his Tunisian experience. By experience he means a changing and transformative determinant. He also refers to the processes of writing his books as transformative experiences because he does not write his books to communicate what he already knows

⁶¹Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 135.

⁶²Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 136.

⁶³Michel Foucault, *À quoi rêvent les Iraniens?* *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no. 727, 16- 22 octobre 1978, 48- 49.

⁶⁴Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 15.

⁶⁵Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 16.

⁶⁶Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 17.

but to enter into the experience of learning something new which can change him radically.⁶⁷ In addition to his Tunisian experience which taught him the existential and political way of being Marxist, Foucault claims in another interview with Farès Sassine, conducted in 1979, that his reading of Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* coincided with the Iranian Revolution. Bloch discusses the religious origin of the idea of revolution, at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of Renaissance, because in his view the religious dissidents of the time had faith in the possibility of this-worldly revolution. So, when he hears about the uprising in the name of religion in Iran, he tries to establish a connection between what was happening in Iran and Bloch's conceptualization of the revolutionary hope. Foucault learns from the connection between the Iranian Revolution and its religious eschatology that without a revolutionary hope there will never be a political revolution.⁶⁸ In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch argues that Marxism does not distinguish between the cold stream of analysis of the historical and socio-economic condition and its ideology, from the warm stream of the revolutionary expectations.⁶⁹ For Bloch, the cold stream of Marxism as the science of struggle forms a unity with its liberating warm stream which connects "the debased, enslaved, abandoned, belittled human being" to the proletariat toward their common emancipation. Bloch sees the Marxist construction of communism an expression of the warm stream of Marxism because the struggle for emancipation needed a home for the de-alienated humans of the future. Bloch equates hope with work, whereas work was the means of man's transformation from animal into human, hope is the means of his second transformation from his alienated condition into his de-alienated condition in the future.⁷⁰

Foucault's fascination with Bloch's conceptualization of hope, his

⁶⁷Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 27.

⁶⁸Michel Foucault, *Entretien Inédit avec Michel Foucault 1979*, Assassines, Le Blog de Farès Sassine, <http://fares-sassine.blogspot.no/2014/08/entretien-inedit-avec-michel-foucault.html>.

⁶⁹Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol.1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 209.

⁷⁰Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 210.

Tunisian experience, his historiography of discursive practices and power and, finally, his approach toward the Iranian revolution were not contradictory but consistent with what he had perused throughout the 1970s, that is, the reconciliation of the realm of theory with the realm of practice. In the same vein, Foucault changed his focus from the discourse on micro-physics of power to a discourse on governmentality and governing and who is qualified to govern. Foucault claims that the Tunisian experience made decisive political impact on him. Now, we can raise the question: can we expect any transformative impact from his experience of the Iranian revolution on him? In my view, Foucault approached the Iranian Revolution as a spectator rather than actor and with only one thing in mind: verification of the revolutionary hope of the Iranian people toward emancipation. Foucault's final work, both published books and lectures are about the redefinition of the concept of political power renamed as the art and forms of governmentality, which I consider as significant supplements to the Marxist theory of state and ideology and analysis of a new form of imperialist governmentality. Since the early 1990s or earlier, this imperialist governmentality has enchanted former "leftists," "radical," and "revolutionaries" to the extent they gladly serve the states within the domain of this imperialist governmentality against all other states and people resisting this structure. Foucault's investigation of how the subject of governing has been constituted is a supplement to Lenin's conceptualization of political power in *The State and Revolution* and Althusser's *Ideological State Apparatuses*.

Foucault and the Concept of Governmentality

In the middle of his lectures on *Territory, Security, Population* (1977-1978), Foucault claims that he preferred "a history of governmentality" as the course's title.⁷¹ In these lectures, Foucault challenges misconception of the state whether as a "cold monster confronting us," or as a means reproducing the relations of production. Foucault

⁷¹Michel Foucault, *Territory, Security, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 144.

argues that these misconceptions have made the state to look like more important than it truly is because the danger is not the state intrusion into society (*étatisation*) but the art of governmentalization. This art of governmentalization of the state, discovered in the eighteenth century, saved the state from various crisis and revolutions and as a result, is “the only real space of political struggle and contestation.”⁷² The idea of the government of the state as the political form of the state by the prince began at the same time as man’s government of himself, his soul, his conducts and his children.⁷³ The concern of government is men’s relations to wealth, resources, territory, fertility, customs, habits, and “ways of acting and thinking.”⁷⁴ In the 1978-1979 lectures which coincide with the Iranian Revolution, Foucault describes the art of government as what the state should be, its *raison d’État*. The art of government is an arrangement of the things which recognize the state as “a discontinuous reality” whose chance for survival depends on its strength, wealth and capability of protecting itself against external and internal threats that may put its existence in danger.⁷⁵ These are the main character of the state before the emergence of the neo-liberal art of government.

For Foucault, the neo-liberal art of government is not a disciplinary society, mass consumption society dominated by commodities, spectacle, and simulacra, but a home to “dynamic of competition” and “enterprise society.”⁷⁶ It replaces human labor by human capital and devalues Marx’s analysis of value without contesting it. Marx argued that the logic of capitalism transforms the concrete human labor into abstract labor power “measured by time, put on the market and paid by wages.” As the concrete human labor is cut off from its human reality to fit into the logic of capital, labor is reduced into “the effects

⁷²Foucault, *Territory, Security, Population*, 144.

⁷³Foucault, *Territory, Security, Population*, 127.

⁷⁴Foucault, *Territory, Security, Population*, 127.

⁷⁵Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4-5.

⁷⁶Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 146-147.

of value produced.”⁷⁷ Thus, instead of challenging Marx’s critique of the logic of capitalism neo-liberal art of government argues that labor is only “a factor of production” which can be activated by investment.⁷⁸ It argues that Marx mistook “[t]he abstraction of labor, which actually only appears through the variable of time” as the product of real capitalism, whereas this abstraction of labor was only a construct put forward by Marx’s contemporary economic theory.⁷⁹ With the epistemological transformation from the classical economy into the neo-liberal economy, the “domain of objects, the general field of reference of economic analysis” such as mechanisms of production and exchange are transformed into “the study and analysis of the way in which scarce means are allocated to competing ends...”⁸⁰ This transformation changes the worker possessing labor power into “an active economic subject” whose wage is not the price of his or her labor power, but an income resulted from the investment of his human capital.⁸¹ As the neo-liberal practice transforms human labor into human capital and every worker into a capitalist, the art of neo-liberal governmentality is focused on the question: who can or should govern?

To discuss this question, Foucault revisits the notion of the care of the self (*epimelia heautou*), a subject elaborated extensively by Epicurus and Epicureans who believed that “Every man should take care of his soul day and night and throughout his life.”⁸² Foucault argues that modern philosophy “neglected the notion of care of the self in its reconstruction of its own history.” Despite the fact that there has been a similar amount of texts and documents on “the care of the self” as there is on “know yourself,” modern philosophy gave a privileged position to know yourself (*gnothi seautou*).⁸³ As a result of this ne-

⁷⁷Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 221.

⁷⁸Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 220.

⁷⁹Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 221.

⁸⁰Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 221.

⁸¹Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 223.

⁸²Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1981-82 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 9.

⁸³Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 12.

glect, philosophy has become a “form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth” and determines “the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth.” The neglect of the care of the self has led modern philosophy to ignore spirituality as “the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth.” According to Foucault, spirituality is the price the subject pays for “access to the truth” because spirituality says that the subject can have “access to the truth” provided that he experiences transformation from himself into “other than himself.” This means, without spirituality, the subject does not have the right to the truth. Whereas the presence of truth indicates that the subject has transformed himself into something new, modern philosophy and science speak of truth only in terms of the “activity of knowing.”⁸⁴ For Foucault, the privileged position of Marxism and psychoanalysis lies in their effort to remind the subject that the truth which can liberate him is related to his being. Because of their preoccupation with “the subject’s preparation for access to the truth” and his “spirituality as a condition of access to the truth,” Marxism and psychoanalysis are more concerned with the care of the self than other branches of knowledge.⁸⁵ The relationship between the truth and transformation of the subject is reflected in the relationship between the cathartic use of “know yourself” and the political use of “know yourself” on the one hand, and “the political use and the cathartic use of care of the self,” on the other hand.⁸⁶ The interaction and interconnection of know yourself and care of the self, constitute “*tekhne tou biou* (the art of living).” As in the Christian asceticism and monasticism of the third and fourth centuries, the art of living is about how one transforms his own self to have access to the truth.⁸⁷

Foucault argues that Descartes and Kant saw the relation of the sub-

⁸⁴Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15.

⁸⁵Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 29.

⁸⁶Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 174.

⁸⁷Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 178.

ject's spiritual transformation to the truth as a paradox indicating "what we cannot know is precisely the structure itself of the knowing subject" and "the condition of spirituality for access to the truth."⁸⁸ Foucault relates this same function of spirituality to Demetrius of Phalerum's conceptualization of effective-relevant and ineffective-irrelevant modes of knowledge. Whereas the former mode of knowledge can be transformed into prescriptions, the latter mode of knowledge lacks the quality of being transformed into prescriptions. Whereas, the relevant-effective knowledge can change "the subject's mode of being," the irrelevant-ineffective knowledge cannot make any impacts on "the subject's mode of being."⁸⁹ We find the same function of spirituality in Epicurus's concept of *phusiologia* which stands in opposition to *paideia* as a mode of knowledge which produces only eloquence and suits people who look for their personal interests. *Paideia* does not reflect on *logos* or reason but performs with *phones* or sounds. Epicurus calls the performer of this mode of knowledge *phones ergastikous* who instead of making reason the object of his reflection, reflects on *phones* to impress the masses, and engages in "conceited chatter with others." Against *phones ergastikous*, Epicurus says, "You must practice philosophy for yourself and not for Greece," because philosophy is "the genuine practice of the self."⁹⁰ Contrary to *paideia*, *phusiologia* prepares (*paraskeuei*) the subject for "whatever circumstance" he encounters in life. As Epicurus defines it, *phusiologia* prepares the subject to resist "every impulse and temptation" which comes from the external world because it enables him "to remain stable" and overcome all disturbances which prevent him to attain his aim.⁹¹ The impact of *phusiologia* on the subject is his "boldness and courage" to resist "beliefs that others wish to impose on him, but also against life's dangers and the authority of those who want to lay down the law."⁹²

⁸⁸Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 190.

⁸⁹Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 237.

⁹⁰Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 239.

⁹¹Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 240.

⁹²Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 240.

The final impact of *physiologia* is *autarkeia* making the individual subject *autarkeis*, a subject that depends only on himself, needs nothing other than himself, and is content with himself since he is the source of all possibilities, experiences, pleasures, and delights. The aim of Epicureanism is absolute mastery over the self. This mastery cannot be achieved through *savoir* but through *connaissance* of nature, insofar as this knowledge leads the subject to overcome fears from nature and gods, and transforms himself into “a free subject” capable of finding within himself permanent and impeccable serenity and joy.⁹³ A physiologist is not the one who merely knows nature, but the one who uses his knowledge of nature to transform himself into a free subject and uses *parrhesia* as the technic of mediating true and relevant knowledge to his disciple. Epicurus says that “I would rather speak in oracles about the things useful to all men” than give “my approval to popular opinion.”⁹⁴ Thus, the subject who tries to use his true knowledge is different from the one whose search for being understood, recognized and approved by everyone, leads him to succumb to the dominant opinion. A truth-seeker who is looking for acceptance by everyone cannot change his mode of being.⁹⁵ Epicureans consider “the most speculative knowledge of physics” as effective and relevant knowledge because it is “part of the subject’s practice on himself” and because it transforms the subject.⁹⁶ Here, Foucault refers to the interrelationship between the principle of care of the self, and know yourself.⁹⁷ In response to the Greek tradition of education, “Socrates advised Alcibiades to take advantage of his youth to take care of himself: “At fifty it will be too late.”⁹⁸ Epicurus’ response to this is “It is never too early or too late to take care of one’s soul. We should therefore practice philosophy when we are

⁹³Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 241.

⁹⁴Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 242.

⁹⁵Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 242.

⁹⁶Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 243.

⁹⁷Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 491.

⁹⁸Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 494.

young and when we are old.”⁹⁹ Philosophy is for Epicurus, the practice of the care of the soul throughout one’s life.¹⁰⁰ Now, the question is: who can or does have the time to practice philosophy or care of the soul or the self? In order to have time to care of themselves, the Spartans: “entrusted the cultivation of their lands to slaves instead of keeping this activity for themselves” because

[t]aking care of oneself is a privilege; it is the symbol of social superiority, setting one apart from those who have to concern themselves with...a trade in order to live. The advantage conferred by wealth, status, and birth is expressed in the fact that one can take care of oneself.¹⁰¹

That is why, “taking care of the self (*epimeleisthai heauto*),” should not be understood as an advice that teachers gave to their disciples to refrain from making mistakes in their private life. They were educating them about a range of “complex and regular activities” which govern the people in their domain.¹⁰²

In December 1978, in the climax of the Iranian revolution, Foucault writes to *L’Unità*, the Italian Communist Party newspaper, to inform them about his willingness to discuss with Italian Communist intellectuals the situation of “the capitalist and socialist states,” “the success of the revolutionary movements in the world,” the “strategy of the parties of Western Europe” toward the “development everywhere of the apparatuses of repression and institutions of national security” and finally “the difficulty in connecting local struggles with the general stakes being waged” internationally.¹⁰³ The subjects proposed by Foucault for discussion give a clear picture of how he sees the world while the Iranian Revolution is unfolding. For Foucault, the world is in a deep economic crisis, and the crisis is nearing its

⁹⁹Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 492.

¹⁰⁰Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 493.

¹⁰¹Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 493.

¹⁰²Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 493.

¹⁰³Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 175.

decisive moment because the conflict between “rich” and “poor” nations, industrialized and underdeveloped countries have coincided with the emergence of “a crisis of government” in the developed nations. The letter to *L’Unità* indicates that Foucault is convinced that the world needs a decisive response from the revolutionary forces. Of all the crises, Foucault emphasizes the crisis of government because government as “the set of institutions and practices by which people are ‘led’, from administration to education” is in a deep crisis. Foucault sees crisis everywhere, in the capitalist as well as in the socialist world because the “techniques, and methods” that have guaranteed the “government” of people, thus far, do not function anymore and people cannot tolerate “the way they are led.”¹⁰⁴ For Foucault, this crisis of government resembles “the period following the Middle Ages,” which resulted in the “entire reorganization of the government of people,” the emergence of “the great nation-states,” “authoritarian monarchies” and “the administration of territories.” Foucault argues that this reorganization generated the new “way of managing and governing people, both in their individual relations and in their social and political one” and considers the situation in 1978-1979 to be “not very far from a similar period,” because all old relationships are called into question, and the people who are in the position of governing are unable to see or manage and govern the ongoing changes. He observes, “We are, I believe, at the beginning of a huge crisis of a wide-ranging reevaluation of the problem of government.”¹⁰⁵ Because of his understanding of the crisis of government in the late 1970s, Foucault sees the Iranian Revolution as a historic opportunity for the revolutionary left to put forward its own strategy, but the left missed the opportunity. Foucault’s argument is similar to Lenin’s remark that “it is not enough for revolution that *the lower classes should not want to live in the old way*. It is also necessary that *the upper classes should be unable to rule and govern in the old way*.”¹⁰⁶ Foucault’s understanding of the revolutionary

¹⁰⁴Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 176.

¹⁰⁵Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 177.

¹⁰⁶V. I. Lenin, *Collected Work*, vol. 19 (Moscow: Progress Publisher, 1977), 222.

situation in Iran can be compared to Rosa Luxemburg's understanding of the 1905 Russian Revolution and her efforts to convince the German workers to consider this Revolution "as their own affair, ... as a chapter of their own social and political history."¹⁰⁷ Luxemburg tried to convey the same message to the German workers in 1918. But as the German workers were preoccupied with their own "distorted expression of the socialist class struggle," she failed in both cases. For Luxemburg, the failure of the 1917 Russian Revolution to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat as the advancement of the bourgeois democracy, was caused partly by the German and international proletariat's infidelity to the "proletarian revolution in an isolated land, exhausted by world war, strangled by imperialism..."¹⁰⁸ The German and international proletariat failed to see their common destiny through the Russian Revolution.

The common destiny is what Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant are preoccupied with when they are asked to reflect on the question *What is Enlightenment?* Because they recognize, according to Foucault, "that they belong to the same history."¹⁰⁹ To Foucault, Kant's reflection on the question of Enlightenment indicates that the critical ontology of modernity is not a theory, a doctrine, a body of knowledge through which we can understand our current condition, but "an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life" which includes in its critique of our social being both a "historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us" and "experiment with the possibility of going beyond them."¹¹⁰ This philosophical ethos is a critical attitude which not only analyzes and discovers the limits of our being but also makes it possible to go beyond those limits.¹¹¹ According to Foucault, this critical attitude is not transcendental, but "genealogical in

¹⁰⁷Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution & The Mass Strike* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 165.

¹⁰⁸Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, Ch. 8, "Democracy and Dictatorship."

¹⁰⁹Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 33.

¹¹⁰Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 50.

¹¹¹Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 50.

its design and archaeological in its method.” The aim of the archaeological method is not the identification of “the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action” but revealing the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do. The genealogical aspect of this critical attitude will help us to reveal the contingencies that have generated our present condition and mode of being, and the possibilities of going beyond our present “being, doing, or thinking.”¹¹² This is the meaning of transformation, whether general or specific. Foucault expected the Iranian Revolution to be the beginning of a general transformation.

Conclusion

As the Iranian Revolution “failed” to fulfill his expectation regarding the general transformation of the global system and the crisis of government, Foucault returns to “the specific transformations” of “our ways of being and thinking,” of our “relations to authority, relations between the sexes” and of our conception of “insanity and illness.” He describes these transformations as a result of the interaction between the “historical analysis and the practical attitude,” which in his view are much preferable than the totalitarian politics which in the name of “a new man” have justified “the worst political systems” of the 20th century.¹¹³ A few years earlier, Foucault was advising his audience to relinquish the issue of the intrusion of the state into civil society, because the real danger lies in the art of governmentalization of the state. But Foucault’s list of the transformations signifies the “advantages” of this art of governmentalizations over other political systems which he deems totalitarian. Since the early 1990s, the lists of such transformations have rationalized the preoccupation of almost all scholars of modern history and politics of the Middle East with two seemingly interconnected questions: who is “for or against the Enlightenment” in the Middle East and, who should govern in this region, seculars (left versus liberal or neo-liberal) or Islamists

¹¹²Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 46.

¹¹³Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 46-47.

(radical versus moderate)? Foucault referred to the former question as an “intellectual blackmail,” a result of “the historical and moral confusionism that mixes the theme of humanism with the question of the Enlightenment.”¹¹⁴ Whereas the first question has brought about historical and moral confusion, the second question has generated various types of political opportunism. The combination of the historical and moral confusion and political opportunism have constituted the main principle of an ideology which in the name of democracy and human rights has rationalized the most perverted form of governmentalization of the states and societies of the Middle East. This ideology does not allow commentators and analysts of modern Iran to examine or interpret the Iranian Revolution as a story or event whose importance does not lie in its closing act or its immediate results but “in its opening up new horizons for the future.” According to Arendt, for Kant, the most significant aspect of the French Revolution was “the *hope* it contained for future generations.”¹¹⁵ The scholarly works on the Iranian Revolution have rarely been interested in touching this particular aspect of the event. Foucault had never tried to write a systematic history or analysis of any political events of historical significance. For him, politics was not an object of systematic analysis but transformative acts of human collectivities against forms of domination shaping our mode of being, seeing, thinking and doing, which he had been analyzing throughout his academic life. Without knowing anything about the details of the universal structure and Epicurean aspects of the Iranian Revolution expressed in its ideology, inspired and cultivated by Marxism, Foucault tried to universalize the Revolution in order to become its spectator-actor. Retrospectively, he realizes that he had never been involved in the act of the Revolution and seems content with his spectator-actor involvement with a community of spectator-actors in France which in his view has brought about specific democratic changes.¹¹⁶ Since its outbreak, the Iranian

¹¹⁴Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 45.

¹¹⁵Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 56.

¹¹⁶Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. See 58-63 for Kant's conception of actor and spectator.

Revolution has been a local and global a transformative event, *a universal point of reference* which cannot be reduced to the actions and views of a selected number of its actors or spectators. Similar to the French and Russian Revolutions, the Iranian Revolution indicated a rupture with the existing discursive and political order, but it did not fit in Foucault's research program.