

What is at the Heart of the Dispute? Reflections on the Foucault Controversy Forty Years Later

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After failing to find any French newspapers interested in employing him as a columnist, Michel Foucault initially visited Iran during the summer of 1978 as a special correspondent for the Italian *Corriere della sera* to discuss the circumstances of the Iranian revolution. Between Summer 1978 and May 1979, Foucault published articles on Iran not only in the *Corriere*, but eventually also in *Le Monde*, and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, as well as agreeing to an interview with an Iranian writers' journal.¹ The articles were soon condemned as Panglos-

¹All translated into English in Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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sian, and Foucault was criticized as an apologist for the repression of the Iranian Revolution. The articles provoked furious responses from many quarters: from feminists in France such as Simone de Beauvoir and the Franco-Iranian writer known only as Atoussa H, and by French scholars of Islam, most notably the well-known Marxist Maxine Rodinson, known to scholars of the Middle East and Islam for his Marxist biography of the prophet and his work on the relationship between Islam and capitalism.²

Michel Foucault was not a historian of Islam. Other than a brief sojourn in Tunisia, he had spent very little time in the Muslim world. While this may have created a more politically aware and anti-colonial sentiment in Foucault, it did not lead to a more nuanced understanding of Islam.³ What he knew of Islam he had learned, it appears, from studying the work of Paul Vielle, Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin.⁴ The choice of these thinkers was not unproblematic for Foucault. In the work of these eminent French sociologists or philosophers of religion, we find an emphasis on the mystical elements of Islam, an emphasis which Foucault would adopt in his own writings, and less emphasis on the historical and material conditions of the emergence of Islam or contemporary Iran, as one would find in the writings of Rodinson. Both Henry Corbin, other than in his magisterial history of Islamic Philosophy,⁵ and Louis Massignon, built their reputations on studies of mystical elements of Islam.⁶ While Paul Vielle, in his early work, had focused on providing a structuralist

²Rodinson Maxime, *Islam and Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1974). See also Maxine Rodinson, *Mohammed* (London: Penguin Press, 1971). The latter book, in particular, attempts to explain the development of Islam in terms of the economic and material conditions prevalent in Arabia at the time of the Prophet.

³Robert J. C. Young, "Foucault in Tunisia," in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (New York: Wiley, 2016).

⁴Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 56.

⁵Louis Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁶Louis Massignon, *Salmān Pāk and the Spiritual Beginnings of Iranian Islam* (Bombay: J. M. Unvala, 1955); See, e.g., Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

account of life in Iran,⁷ heavily influenced by French sociologists of the mid-century, his later work, on nationalist accounts of revolution, avoided as far as possible, any analysis of materialist explanations of revolutionary nationalism.⁸

While there is no dearth of issues on which Foucault was challenged, subsequent debate has turned on the question of whether or not Foucault or his critics presented an accurate accounting of the revolution. For his critics, the points of contention include his representation of Islam, his purported blindness to the retrograde nature of the revolution, his infatuation with what might be called the spiritualism of right-wing Shiism,⁹ and his blindness to questions of gender.¹⁰ Those who argue on one side of the debate, such as Afary and Anderson, suggest that there was a leftist current to the revolution which Foucault should have identified, that he was uncritical in his support of the right-wing elements of the Iranian Revolution, and that his supposed turn to ethics later in life is at least in part a recognition of his failure to understand the consequences of his involvement in Iran.¹¹ Ghamari-Tabrizi has argued, convincingly, that they overstate the leftism of the Iranian Revolution and that by the time of Foucault's involvement with Iran, the Iranian left had largely ceased to be a driver of revolution in Iran.¹²

In our paper, we argue that underneath the debate is actually a much larger debate in the social sciences about materialist and structural explanations of history. Ghamari-Tabrizi hints at this when he argues that Foucault finds in the revolution an ambiguous moment for rein-

⁷Paul Vieille, "Naissance et mort dans une société islamique," *Diogenes* (1957): 114; Paul Vieille, "Un Mariage en Iran," *Revue française de sociologie* VII, no. I, (January-March 1966).

⁸Paul Vieille and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Le discours populaire de la révolution iranienne*, 2 vols. (Paris: Contemporanéité, 1990).

⁹Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁰Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 92 *et passim*.

¹¹We find the last claim here suspicious at best, but it has been well-treated elsewhere and we do not discuss it here.

¹²Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*, chap. 3.

vention.¹³ We argue in our paper that much of the dispute can actually be traced to a dispute not only in the philosophy of the social sciences, but also in French academia, over the role of such explanations in the study of the Middle East and political Islam. Foucault's choice of authors and method (not just in his writings on the Iranian revolution but elsewhere) meant that he was committed to giving primacy to a non-deterministic explanation of history; this did not allow for an in-depth sociological investigation of the material conditions on the ground as understood by his leftist and Marxist critics. As such, we develop Rodinson's work on political Islam to advance the dispute between Foucault and other members of the left.

Two Accounts of Foucault and the Revolution (Or the Twin Seductions of Islamic Revolution and Radicalism)

The initial dispute turned on the question of the extent to which Foucault ignored alternative groups also involved in the Iranian Revolution. Afary and Anderson argue that in unequivocally applauding the revolution, Foucault dismissed the rightful concerns of women and other minority groups alike. In deeming all criticisms of the religiously driven revolutionary movement as being Orientalist in nature, his intellectual lacuna, pertaining to feminism, they claim, extends itself beyond the confines of mere theory. This had notable ramifications for women, homosexuals, and religious minority groups, the eventual suppression of whom under Khomeini drew a half-hearted passing criticism in Foucault's essay "Is it Useless to Revolt?"

Megill has suggested categorizing the Foucauldian corpus as beginning with the early archaeological and structuralist period (which ends with the publication of the *Archeology of Knowledge* in 1969), and the later genealogical period (which began after a period of relative silence with the publication of *Discipline and Punish* in 1975).¹⁴ Foucault's latter methodology differs both from structural and histor-

¹³Ghamari-Tabrizi. *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*, 58.

¹⁴Allan Megill, "Foucault, Structuralism, and the Ends of History," *The Journal of Modern History* 51, No. 3 (Sep. 1979): 451-503.

ical materialist accounts of history insofar as tracing the trajectory of groups of people in history does not require, he claims, a totalizing ideology under which the subject is subsumed. In Foucault's words, a genealogical telling of history rejects grand narratives of a linear march towards progress. In a concrete example, the concept of liberty and emancipation is not defined in consistent and constant terms in history—liberty as is understood in a Marxist sense, perhaps, is a result of class domination, and is not universal in the way it has been grasped and appropriated throughout history.¹⁵ Foucault writes, “The forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts.”¹⁶

Yet, Afary and Anderson suggest that a closer look at Foucault's writings on genealogy reveals his own “meta-narrative, a binary construct wherein traditional social orders were privileged over modern ones.”¹⁷ On that view, Foucault's romanticization of the Iranian Revolution and the consequent disregard for notes of caution sounded by feminists and other radicals was not a philosophical aberration. In fact, it was the product of a one-sided, Western-centric indictment of modernity, a theme that reverberated throughout his writings.¹⁸ In expressing a simplistic critique of modernity, Foucault downplays the repercussions of the “harsh and confining disciplinary practices of the pre-modern world,”¹⁹ the brunt of which was often borne by women and children, amongst other groups of people.

Amongst those who called on Foucault to formulate a more nuanced view of the Iranian Revolution was the Marxist French scholar Maxime Rodinson. Rodinson, in addition to his embrace of historical materialism, was an accomplished student of Islamic history, so it

¹⁵Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 150.

¹⁶Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 154. Echoing the aleatory account of his teacher Althusser.

¹⁷Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 22.

¹⁸Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 9.

¹⁹Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 26.

comes as no surprise that his criticism of Foucault is primarily rooted in discerning “great gaps in his [Foucault’s] knowledge of Islamic history.”²⁰ He criticized Foucault for being too obsessed with sociological theory at the expense of actual material conditions when he romanticized the Revolution as the “people’s revolution.” In reality, Rodinson argued, it was largely driven from the top down – by a spiritual leader who advanced the theory of *Velayat-I Faqih* (government by the clerics).²¹ Although Foucault was no proponent of a theocratic government and state apparatus, Rodinson identifies the articulation of a “political will” by the masses as a point of immense fascination for Foucault. Inspired by Shariati, Foucault was drawn to the idea of political life as a repository for spirituality, with the latter being its lifeblood and chief source of sustenance, with both elements existing in symbiosis driven by the tenacity of a people determined to incite change.²²

Since Afary and Anderson as well as Ghamari-Tabrizi all identify Shariati as being formative to Foucault’s writings on the revolution, and since Shariati is considered the “main ideologue of the Iranian revolution,”²³ our argument depends on reconstructing those elements of Shariati’s thought borrowed by Foucault. Afary and Anderson correctly observe that Foucault’s support for the revolution was grounded in his overall anti-modernism, since both he and the Islamist revolutionaries were “searching for a new form of political spirituality as a counter discourse to a thoroughly materialistic world.”²⁴ Shariati’s philosophy, which influenced the more religious-

²⁰Maxime Rodinson, “Critique of Foucault on Iran,” in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism 2005*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 270.

²¹Rodinson, “Critique of Foucault on Iran,” 270. Khomeini argued that, in the absence of the Imam, Allah had ordained clerics to rule in his stead. (Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981).

²²See, e.g. Ali Shariati, *Man and Islam* (Berkeley: Islamic Publications International, 2005).

²³Ervand Abrahamian, “Ali Shari’ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 102, *Islam and Politics* (1982): 24-28.

²⁴Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 13.

ly driven factions of the revolution, envisioned a fusion of traditional Shia Islamic thinking with resources at the disposal of the modern subject.²⁵ Aysha comments that religion's purpose in both Shariati's and Foucault's thinking was to be "a force for change, progress, for moving forward in time towards something *other than what existed in the Islamic past and the Western present*."²⁶ However, it is probably a stretch to argue, as Afary and Anderson do, that both parties locate this political spirituality in "idealized notions of premodern society."²⁷ Borrowing both from the corpus of traditional Islamic scholarship and from the writings of Western revolutionaries (most notably Marx's writings on objectification and alienation), Shariati went above and beyond in conceptualizing a unique liberation theology steeped in Shia Islam, espousing the emancipatory ethics that he believed were stamped out through the institutionalization of religion.²⁸ Aysha aptly elaborates on this:

...they [the Iranian people] fall back on their cultural heritage and indigenized their desire to deal with the West on an equal footing...It is the tale of a philosophical journey of self-discovery that the conceptually loaded term "fundamentalism" cannot capture in the peculiar case of Iran.²⁹

Rodinson rejects several elements of Foucault's approach to the study of history, notably the diachronic versus synchronic distinction in Foucault's historical method. With respect to Islam, Rodinson's criticisms of Foucault stems from his incredulity towards what Foucault refers to as "political spiritualities." He believes him to have been far too optimistic about the possibility of a progressive theocratic regime. He accuses Foucault of assuming that labeling a state or

²⁵Emad El-Din Aysha, "Foucault's Iran and Islamic Identity Politics: Beyond Civilizational Clashes, External and Internal," *International Studies Perspectives*, no. 7 (2006): 378.

²⁶El-Din Aysha, "Foucault's Iran and Islamic Identity Politics," 378.

²⁷Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 13. For rebuttal, see Emad El-Din Aysha, "Foucault's Iran and Islamic Identity Politics."

²⁸El-Din Aysha, "Foucault's Iran and Islamic Identity Politics," 378.

²⁹El-Din Aysha, "Foucault's Iran and Islamic Identity Politics," 378.

society humanist would “render the states to which they are applied magically capable of faithfully meeting the obligations to which the doctrine they venerate should commit them.”³⁰ He takes issue with Foucault for revering and being fascinated by political spirituality because doing so means placing it above and outside of history, as something untainted by corruption at the hands of humans. The fact of the matter, according to Rodinson, is that “all of these ‘political spiritualities’ escape only rarely from the usual laws of political struggle.”³¹ Foucault could be optimistic about the establishment of humanist ideals under a clerical regime only because he was not intimately acquainted with the history of the matter. For Rodinson, “political spirituality” was simply a “covering over the more material motives for the discontent and the revolt” and not an idea that was innate to the revolutionary movement.³² Rodinson believes that Foucault had essentially ignored any empirical understanding of the course of the revolution and instead been seduced by his *a priori* assumptions.³³

However, it would be an overstatement to claim that Foucault’s analysis of the Iranian Revolution was entirely bereft of historical consideration and entrenched only in theory. While it is true that a reappraisal of all philosophical and political thought was a driving force for his decision to place his hopes in the revolution, and that he was glaringly neglectful of many elements of Islamic history, it is also true that the hope he harbored reflected his analysis of the historical role of religion and spirituality in revolutionary politics. Drawing parallels between Shi’ite Islam and Christianity, he believed Shi’ism to have “played a key role in ‘inciting and fomenting political aware-

³⁰Rodinson, “Critique of Foucault on Iran,” 275.

³¹Rodinson, “Critique of Foucault on Iran,” 276.

³²Rodinson, “Critique of Foucault on Iran,” 272.

³³Similarly, see Robbie Duschinsky, “‘The First Great Insurrection Against Global Systems’: Foucault’s Writings on the Iranian Revolution,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 4 (2006): 555 (writing that: “caused by a seductive desire to see in a contemporary radical movement the solution to their theoretical problems and a possible path out of the cage of Western metaphysical thought.”).



ness”³⁴ and saw Christianity to have played a similar role in formulating an oppositional role during certain periods of European history. In particular, religious movements powered by Christian thought “had sometimes fought against feudal lords, against the state, and alongside the revolutionary peasantry. Here, Foucault singled out the Anabaptist movement and its role in the German peasant uprisings of the sixteenth century.”³⁵ In his dialogue with Baqir Parham, Foucault explains that these Christian movements “rejected the power of the state, government bureaucracy, social and religious hierarchies—everything. This movement supported the right to individual consciences and the independence of small religious groups that wished to be together, have their own organizations, without hierarchy or social stratification between them.”³⁶

With that in mind, it becomes clear that Foucault’s enthusiasm (albeit uncritical) for the Iranian Revolution was not cemented in a transcendental, innately emancipatory perspective of religion. Rather, he situated it in its historical context, limited by time and spatial considerations, deliberating on the ways in which it can be subsumed under and appropriated for revolutionary praxis. He views it as a challenge to what he sees as the reductivist Marxist account of religion as a method of social control.³⁷ He observes that the form of religion that would rightfully be considered an opiate of the people was one the religious form advocated by the Church and State in Europe during the rise of capitalism. Religion was singled out to instill a sense of resignation in the “rebellious workers... and make them accept their fate.”³⁸

Other evidence pointing towards the retrograde nature of the result of the revolution had a gendered aspect to it. Afary and Anderson are

³⁴Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 76.

³⁵Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 76.

³⁶ Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, “On Marx, Islam, Christianity & Revolution”, reprinted in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islam*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 187.

³⁷Karl Marx, “Introduction,” in *Marx’s Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, ed. Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.)

³⁸Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 130.

the principle writers to have addressed, in scrupulous detail, Foucault's willful ignorance of the history of religion in Iran, and his disregard for the fact that issues pertaining to gender were inevitably part and parcel of the revolutionary movement. They too, like Rodinson, emphasize an absence of historical rigor in his writings on the Iranian revolution. Since he uses language that uncritically romanticized Shi'ism as a force of revolution, Afary and Anderson point out that "he seemed unaware of the fact that Shi'ism was first imposed on the majority of the population as late as the Safavid dynasty of the sixteenth century."³⁹ They also charge him with turning a blind eye to the simple fact that for the most part, religious institutions outwardly maintained their allegiance to the state, and that the clashes that occurred "had often been over social and political reforms that threatened to undermine existing class, religious, or gender hierarchies."⁴⁰ In their book, they suggest that Foucault's oblivion extended to his ignorance or denial of Khomeini's convictions as a junior cleric during the Muhammad Reza Shah era. This is when he published "*Kashaf al-Asrar (The Unveiling of Secrets)* in 1943, a book that advocated a return of clerical supervision of the entire legal code, the return of the veil, as well as Quranic physical punishment."⁴¹ All of this should have alerted Foucault, the argument goes, to the dissonance between his optimism for the egalitarian outcome of the revolutionary movement and the less equitable ideas espoused by the spearheads of the movement. Foucault had a sizeable blind spot where women's rights issues were concerned, and he all but glossed over their significance during the revolution. It is noteworthy that he failed to acknowledge the reality of women's circumstances in the Islamism advanced by Khomeini, something going beyond just pinning. However, if the best that could be said is that Foucault underestimated the role of the revolutionary left in the revolution, then Afary and Anderson are on thin ground. We will suggest however that the failure to properly

³⁹Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 84.

⁴⁰Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 84.

⁴¹Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 76. They argue that Khomeini's understanding of Hudd punishments had a strong elements of gender discrimination to it.

consider the role of the left in the Revolution, including its failings, is indicative of larger methodological debates, which we turn to in the final section of this paper.

Ghamari-Tabrizi has shown that the role of the left – both in its Communist and feminist forms – in the Revolution was scattered and uneven at best. It is true that Communists have been active in Iran since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906,⁴² with the largest of the Iranian Communist parties, the Tudeh, being founded in 1941. However, Iranian Communists have suffered from oscillating and at most periodic success. They suffered from an initial legitimacy crisis due to their perceived subordination to the USSR, most notably during the period of Soviet Occupation⁴³ and during the nationalization crisis over the Anglo-Iranian dispute over the legitimacy of oil rights.⁴⁴ During the period between 1941-53, Tudeh operated in a relatively free political environment, and was not overtly subservient to Moscow. However, after the coup in 1953 and the subsequent repression of leftist movements, Tudeh had limited presence in the country in 1960s. Eventually the détente between the USSR and Iran, where the Soviet Union ultimately approved of the Shah’s reforms in 1961, forced the Communist party into an unhappy collaboration with Shah (Tudeh part at least) even if members were ideologically opposed.⁴⁵

Moreover, as the Tudeh lost its base, it became more and more reliant on Moscow.⁴⁶ As part of its policy of rapprochement, Moscow encouraged Tudeh to create closer links with clergy, and blamed them for not having done it before.⁴⁷ This tended to reduce the importance

⁴²Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2000), xii.

⁴³Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 22.

⁴⁴Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, 7.

⁴⁵Sepehr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 240.

⁴⁶Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran*, 144.

⁴⁷Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran*, 128; citing Rostislav Ulyanovks, *Sarnevsh-t-e Enqelab-e Iran (The Fate of Iranian Revolution)*, trans. Tudeh Party (np: Tudeh Publishers, 1985), 11. See also, Rostislav Ulyanovks, “The Iran Revolution and its Peculiar Features,” in *Social*

of Tudeh amongst the new generation of Marxists which emerged in the 1970s, who viewed as wholly negative Soviet influence in the country.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Shah's secret police, the SAVAK, broke Tudeh and Islamic Faidayan in the 60s and 70s, eliminating their ability to participate effectively in the revolution.⁴⁹ By September 1978, Ayatollah Khomeini had become the undisputed leader of the revolution.⁵⁰

The post-revolutionary transformation proceeded in three stages. After the revolution, the Islamists emerged as its leaders. Nevertheless, they saw their first goal as eliminating elements of the old regime. They continued to co-exist, generally, with the other revolutionary parties. Even within the Islamist movement, the leftist Islamic wing co-existed alongside other more conservative elements. Initially, tension inside the new regime was between the Provisional Government faction headed by Mehdi Bazargan, who was known as a leftist-Islamist, and the Revolutionary Council dominated by the Islamic Republic Party and Ayatollah Mohammad Hosein Beheshti.⁵¹ Bazargan was appointed the first post-revolutionary prime minister, holding power from February until November 1979, when he resigned after the storming of the American Embassy by radical student groups associated with right wing elements of the revolution. Bazargan, during his time as leader of the Provisional Government, attempted to bring the government under the control of the constitution. He believed that the principle task of the government was to act "as a regulator and arbitrator between different components."⁵² In contemporary Iran, Bazargan argued, "the state had come to dominate social life

Theory and Practice, no. 2 (February 1983): 104.

⁴⁸Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 145.

⁴⁹Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 49.

⁵⁰Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 96.

⁵¹Maziar Behrooz, "Factionalism in Iran under Khomeini," *Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 4 (October 1991): 597-614, 597.

⁵²Saeed Barzin, "Constitutionalism and Democracy in the Religious Ideology of Mehdi Bazargan," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 1 (1994): 85-101, 98.

and to impose itself on all social domains.”⁵³ With these arguments Bazargan brought back tensions from the earlier constitutional debates in Iran over the compatibility between Islamic government, favored by the right-wing elements, and constitutionalism.⁵⁴

After the resignation of Bazargan, and in particular during the period of 1981-1983, Iran society saw a gradual reduction in the freedoms (such as the freedom to organize), which emerged in the post-revolutionary environment.⁵⁵ During that time, the Islamists moved to eliminate the last remnants of the Marxists organizations. By 1983, they were in complete control of the country and the government.

Similarly, women’s opposition to the Islamists peaked in the early years of the Revolution, and had very limited success thereafter. Those women who challenged the revolution were often middle and upper-class women who had benefited from the loosening of strictures on women by the Shah prior to the Revolution.⁵⁶ During the revolutionary period, they attempted to organize a series of protests against the increasing Islamization of the revolution. Timed for March 8, 1979 – International Women’s Day – protests were organized by the National League of Women (ettehadiéh-ye melli zanan)⁵⁷ and by the more centrist organization Liberation of Women (raha’i-ye zanan)⁵⁸ They found few allies. One Marxist party, the Faidaiyan, initially defended the rights of the demonstrators. However, they ultimately took no concrete action. Mired in Marx’s class based analysis, they were theoretically unprepared for an analysis of gen-

⁵³Barzin, “Constitutionalism and Democracy,” 98.

⁵⁴For a helpful discussion, see, e.g. Saïd Amir Arjomand, “The 1906-07 Iranian Constitution and the Constitutional Debate on Islam,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 5, no. 2 (2012): 152-174.

⁵⁵Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 102-103.

⁵⁶Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 107.

⁵⁷The group, comprising Marxists supporters of the Faidayan (including mainly students, teachers and nurses), published the magazines *Equality* and *Women and Struggle*.

⁵⁸They were the more radical of the women’s group, publishers of the journal women’s emancipation. See Farah Azari, “The Post Revolution Women’s Movement in Iran,” in *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Fundamentalism*, ed. Farah Azari (Ithaca: Ithaca Press, 1983), 195-6.

der politics during the Revolution.⁵⁹ With little external support, the women's demonstration on 8 March 1979 were brutally suppressed by pro-IRI groups known as Hezbollah⁶⁰ and the organizations soon faded from view. Eventually the IRI removed women from judiciary and made demands on Islamic dress.

Additionally, the Marxists were utterly outmaneuvered by the Islamists in terms of their radicalism and anti-imperialism.⁶¹ As we saw with respect to the Faidayn, Tudeh's analysis of Islamic history remained mired in a Marxist theory of class.⁶² There existed no peasantry to join a revolutionary peasant class (and, in any rate, no Maoist theory of revolution led by the peasant class was tolerated by the majority of communists in Iran).⁶³ Not only were the Communists greatly weakened by the Shah's agents following the 1953 coup, but their support was also undercut by the rise of political Islam.⁶⁴

Varieties of Explanation in the Social Sciences

If Foucault's understanding of the forces at play during the Iranian revolution was at least partially defensible on empirical grounds, where should we look to fully grasp the greater significance of this debate? In this final section, we turn to accounts of the role of materialist and structuralist explanations in history. Marxist materialism can be succinctly outlined in Marx's own words when he wrote, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness."⁶⁵ In Marxist terms, the modes and relations of production that constitute

⁵⁹Eliz Sanasarian, "An Analysis of Fida'i and Mojaheedin Positions on Women's Rights," in *Women and Revolution in Iran*, ed. Guity Nashat Becker (Boulder: Westview, 1983), 97-198.

⁶⁰Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 107.

⁶¹Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 137.

⁶²Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 139.

⁶³Nikki R. Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim World* (New York: University Press of New York, 1995), 60-95.

⁶⁴Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran Berkeley*, 149.

⁶⁵Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1904), 11.

the economic relations of a society form the base upon which culture, religion, ideology, art, legal, political and social institutions, norms and values supervene. Although both exist in a state of constant interplay, in Marx's view the superstructure grows out of the base (the relations of production) and is a direct reflection of it insofar as the existing prevailing norms and ideologies seek to justify the base.⁶⁶

Early on, despite his claims to the contrary, Foucault was associated with Marxism under the influence of his teacher Althusser: albeit a Marxism distinct from Rodinson's. Later in life, he argued that the Marxist approach could be subsumed under general conceptions of social scientific discourse. He claimed that "Marx's economic discourse comes under the rules of formation of the scientific discourses that were peculiar to the nineteenth century ... Marxist economics – through its basic concepts and the general rules of its discourse – belongs to a type of discursive formation that was defined around the time of Ricardo."⁶⁷

His rejection of the economic version of Marxism emerges prominently in Foucault's genealogical period (occurring as part of what Sève and others have labeled the theoretic reduction of Marxism and abandonment of causal accounts of social change).⁶⁸ The rejection of this model is evident in his writings on the Iranian Revolution wherein he gives primacy to the act of rebellion itself and the doors of transformation that it unlocked over anxieties about the conse-

⁶⁶As Marx argues, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Karl Marx, *18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte* (Moscow: International Publishers, 1994).

⁶⁷Michel Foucault. *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (*The Essential Works*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 2001), 269; cited in Mark Olssen, "Foucault and Marxism: Rewriting the Theory of Historical Materialism," *Policy Futures in Education* 2, nos. 3/4 (2004): 454-482. Of course, he also denied a number of other things: "I have never been a Freudian, I have never been a Marxist, and I have never been a structuralist." (Michael Foucault, "Critical Theory/Intellectual History," (an interview with Michel Foucault by Gérard Raulet) in Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, trans. Alan Sheridan et al., ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988), 22.

⁶⁸Bob Scholte, "Introduction: Structuralism and Marxism," *International Journal of Sociology* 2, nos. 2/3 (1972): 115-132 and 119.

quences of the revolutionary movement.⁶⁹ Ignoring the material conditions on the ground, both economic (related to the failure in Iranian history for a revolutionary proletariat and workers movement to develop) and political (the oppression of the communists by the Shah's regime), Foucault is able to instead cast the revolution as moment of emancipatory breach.

This reading of the Iranian revolution is rooted in his general stance on the inevitability of power relations and the implications this has for emancipatory politics. However, while Foucault rejects the role of economic history, he effectively replaces economic determinism with determinism by relations of power which, "like historical materialism, takes all social practices as transitory, and all intellectual formations as indissociably connected with power and social relations."⁷⁰ Flynn notes that for Foucault, the fact that "...every exercise of power is accompanied by or gives rise to resistance opens a space for possibility and freedom in any context."⁷¹ Similarly, Ghamari-Tabrizi notes that "rather than posing a conventional opposition between a particular past-orientation and a prescriptive future-project, Foucault defined history as a way of reinventing the present moment."⁷² In the Iranian revolution, Foucault saw the near-mythical concept of the "collective will of the people" brought to life. Although the uprising was wrought with ambiguities and complexities (as all revolutions inevitably are), it was this ambivalence that Foucault found notably appealing and what other members of the French intelligentsia found objectionable. Their objection was rooted in, according to scholars like Ghamari-Tabrizi, an analysis steeped in a strict bifurcation of secularist versus religious groups within the revolutionary movement, and in a teleological view of the revolution; that is, the end or aftermath was already preordained and constitutively encompassed at the revolution's inception.

⁶⁹Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*, 58.

⁷⁰Mark Olssen, "Foucault and Marxism," 457; Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism, History: Mode of Production vs Mode of Information* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 39-40.

⁷¹Thomas Flynn, "Foucault's Mapping of History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 36.

⁷²Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*, 58.

Yet for Foucault, historical events were what people made of them; they are decidedly unconditioned by material conditions. He rejected the inevitability of a people being rendered helpless in the midst of sweeping changes unraveling around them. Being opposed to understanding history in universal terms, Foucault's writings rejected any "uniform model of temporalization."⁷³ This is because his historical method is "based on a profound distrust of essences, natures, and other kinds of unifying, totalizing, and exclusionary thought that threaten individual freedom and creativity."⁷⁴ Characterized by qualities of postmodernism that include "multiplicity of lines of explanations," "dispersion of events", and an "appeal to space" instead of time, Foucault's philosophy is an attempt to move away from linear "master narratives" such as the Marxist conceptualization of history.⁷⁵

This theoretical background explains how Foucault grappled with a momentous event such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In a conversation with Baqir Parham in 1978, Foucault argued that humanity was at "point zero."⁷⁶ This insight stemmed from his understanding of the "two grand and painful experiences...in the last two centuries."⁷⁷ The first were the liberal revolutions of the eighteenth century that gave rise to an industrial capitalist society in which he found little to extol. Second, the emancipatory promises espoused by the socialist and communist movements ultimately fell short and resulted in highly authoritarian dictatorships of the twentieth century. Hence, in the uprising of the Iranian people, he saw a momentous possibility for a colossal reinvention of political thought and vision for the future. When asked what his thoughts on the role of religion were in the then transpiring revolutionary movement, he stressed the positive historical role of Shi'a Islam and argued that it, of all religions, was particu-

⁷³Flynn, "Foucault's Mapping of History," 37.

⁷⁴Flynn, "Foucault's Mapping of History," 39-40.

⁷⁵Flynn, "Foucault's Mapping of History," 44.

⁷⁶Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, "On Marx, Islam, Christianity & Revolution," *Daedalus* 128, no. 1 (2005).

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, "On Marx, Islam, Christianity & Revolution," 128.

larly conducive to political awakening,⁷⁸ drawing implicitly upon Ali Shariati's Shia liberation theology. For Shariati, Shia Islam creates a theology "in which prayer and politics, submission and subversion, mystical seclusion and revolution conjoin in a struggle for justice."⁷⁹ Foucault was inspired by this account. However, whereas Foucault's critics indict him for naively enabling the establishment of a theocratic regime, his interests lay not in the relation between religious dogma and forms of governance. Rather, he was interested in religion's ability to convert multiple forms and layers of mass discontent into a powerful revolutionary force.⁸⁰ This train of thought on Shia Islam specifically was influenced by the French scholars Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin, "both of whom regarded the quest for justice and mystical spirituality as the kernel of Shi'ism."⁸¹ In his writings on Iran, he turns both economic determinism and an Orientalist reading of the foundations of the revolutionary movement on their heads:

In rising up, the Iranians said to themselves—and this perhaps is the soul of the uprising: 'Of course, we have to change this regime and get rid of this man, we have to change this corrupt administration, we have to change the whole country, the political organization, the economic system, the foreign policy. But, above all, we have to change ourselves. Our way of being, our relationship with others, with things, with eternity, with God, etc., must be completely changed and there will only be a true revolution if this radical change in our experience takes place.' ... In this way they had of living the Islamic religion as a revolutionary force, there was something other than the desire to obey the law more faithfully, there was the desire to renew their existence by going back to a spiritual experience that they thought they could find with Shi'ite Islam.⁸²

⁷⁸Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, "On Marx, Islam, Christianity & Revolution," 129.

⁷⁹Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*, 65.

⁸⁰Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*, 65.

⁸¹Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*, 65.

⁸²Michel Foucault, "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit," in *Foucault and Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism 1978*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson

Foucault indicates that the Iranian people did not just allow history to run its course; they exercised astounding agency, taking matters of historical precedence into their own hands. At the same time, they were able to unite different factions of society under a common slogan: “We want nothing from this regime.”⁸³

Concluding Remarks

Afary and Anderson charge Foucault with willful ignorance of feminist and secularist warnings about the more exclusionary nature of the religious groups policies and attitudes.⁸⁴ Believing him to be dismissive of the antidemocratic and anti-minority facets of the Islamist factions, he was taken to task for being enraptured by political spirituality, which resulted in a monumental lapse in judgment on his part. As we have shown however, drawing on the work of other observers of the Iranian Revolution, Afary and Anderson overstate the participation and strength of leftist groups during the revolutionary period (the leftists had largely been neutralized by this point).

However, their analysis of Foucault’s understanding of the potential of revolutionary Shia Islam successfully highlights lacuna in his thought. By stressing freedom above the determinism of material conditions, by relying on a genealogical approach which attempts to develop a Nietzschean model of the contingency of history,⁸⁵ Foucault turned his back on an analysis of material conditions in society. As we have suggested, the rise of conservative factions in the Revolution is entirely explainable by features of Iranian history. At the same time, these features of history shown by the Revolution was always likely to be retrograde, particularly with respect to the rights of women and minorities.

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 250-259.

⁸³Michel Foucault, “The Shah is a Hundred Years Behind the Times,” in *Foucault and Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism 1978*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 194.

⁸⁴Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 76.

⁸⁵Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”.