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"Foucault in Iran: Against History, Writing a History of the Present"

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> We must not imagine that the world turns toward us a legible face which we would have only to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which predisposes the world in our favor. We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them.
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> (Foucault, 1981:67)

Michel Foucault travelled to Iran twice, in late summer and early fall of 1978, as an already esteemed philosopher but a novice reporter. His trips were made possible by the deal he struck with an Italian daily paper, *Corriere Della Ser*, to write and edit a regular feature, 'Michel Foucault Investigates'. He was supposed to take on Carter's America, but the burgeoning revolution in Iran was of more pressing importance. What resulted from those two trips was a series of articles, interviews, and features, which appeared in French and Italian papers between 1978 and 1979, and in which he was enthusiastically supportive of the Revolution. The response to his articles was much harsher in France than it was in Italy, but the reviews were not pleasant in either case, especially after it became clear how brutal and oppressive the aftermath was. The Iranian affair bruised his reputation, and 'how could he have been so wrong?' became the question of the hour. Intellectuals demanded that he – the foremost critic of the institution of confession in Western tradition – confess his "mistakes" (Eribon, 1994:216). The 'Foucault controversy' that resulted from his writings remains unresolved 40 years later, and his views have given a host of interpretations and accusations since.

The charges are many and varied, but they boil down to the accusation that Foucault was another botched Orientalist (albeit of a "decidedly Leftist inflection"), chasing a romanticized pre-modern vision of the world, both "blind to the reactionary trajectory of the revolution and deaf to the voices of resistance" (Scullion, 1995:17). Guided by his anti-Western, anti-universal values project, he searched for an antidote to the empty materialism of the West in "idealized notions of premodern social orders" (Afary and Anderson, 2005:13). His writings appear either "incommensurable with his larger oeuvre" (Keating, 1997:171) or, on the contrary, they are "in fact closely related to his general theoretical writings on the discourses on power and the hazards of modernity" and left "a lasting impact on his subsequent oeuvre" (Afary and Anderson, 2005:3).

How do we situate Foucault's writings on the Iranian Revolution in his broader political and philosophical project, and can we assume there is indeed a coherent 'project'? How does he fair in the Orientalist charges levelled against him? And, above all, is there anything valuable

in Foucault's writings that would help us understand the Revolution, and perhaps other debates about the Arab World? This paper will attempt to shed some light on the latter question through an exploration of the former ones. I begin by exploring how Foucault understood the revolution as a historical event, then analyze his understanding of Islam in light of Ali Shariati's writings, his thoughts on 'Islamic government' and finally, consider Khomeini not as a fundamentalist but a populist. Throughout the paper, I refer to criticisms made of Foucault by Afary and Anderson (2005) in their book *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, as I understand them to be his latest and most relevant critics in the 'Iran controversy'. I will be arguing that although Foucault was neither an expert on Iranian history (indeed, he only became interested in Iran in 1977), he grasped the unique singularity of the Iranian Revolution, and there is something important to recover in his refusal to see it from the standpoint of linear revolutionary trajectory.

Against teleology

Iran came to Foucault's attention in 1977 through his engagement with the *Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*, a prisoners' rights' activist network he helped found. Although he previously held no interest in Iranian politics or history, he began preparing for his travels; Paul Vieille, the French specialist on the sociology and anthropology of Iran, was Foucault's foremost contact, and introduced him to Abolhasan Bani Sadr, who would later become the first president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He also read Ali Shariati, one of the key intellectuals behind the Revolution, as well as Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin, two prominent figures in the French orientalist scholarship of Islamic studies. They "tried to circumvent doctrinal Islam and its interpretive legalism by emphasizing the significance of mysticism and Sufi traditions in Islam", and their mystic and spiritual readings of Islam were heavy influences on Foucault's thinking (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016:56).

Arriving in Tehran two days after Black Friday, during which eighty-eight people were killed by machine-gun fire opened at the protestors, Foucault (2005:257)[1] was surprised to see "an absence of fear and an intensity of courage, or rather, the intensity that people were capable of when danger, though still not removed, had already been transcended" rather than a "terrorized city". In the marching masses Foucault witnessed for the first time the manifestation of a collective will, something he did not think possible before:

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[1] [1] Quotes from Foucault's reportages and interview about Iran refer to the collection of his writings in the Appendix in Afary, J., & Anderson, K. B. (2005). Foucault and the Iranian Revolution:Gender and the Seductions of Islamism (annotated edition edition). Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

> Among the tings thing that characterize this revolutionary event, there is the fact that it has brought out – and few people in history have had this – an absolutely collective will. The collective will is a political myth with which jurists and philosophers try to analyze or to justify institutions, etc. It's a theoretical tool: nobody has ever seen the 'collective will', and personally, I thought that the collective will was like God, like the soul, something one would never encounter (Foucault, 2005:253).

The precondition to the possibility of the expression of the collective will was the existence of the 'spiritual', something missing from Western culture since the Reformation, which animated the political will. The 'spiritual' in this case refers to a "form of subjection", the transformative construction of the subject, "a subject acceding to a certain mode of being", that frees it from historical determinism (Foucault in Bernauer and Rasmussen, 1984:14). The Enlightenment brought with it a universal rationality and a vision of History, setting us on a path of 'progress', where progress equals modernization equals secularization equals Westernization. This teleological understanding is firmly rooted in the past with a clear view to a delineated future. In the context of Iran, it presumes a sharp division between Islam and secularism, and sees the Iranian Revolution in terms of a traditional society struggling in the modernizing Middle East (Algar, 1972; Skocpol, 1982; Lewis, 1988). However, Foucault discovers in the revolution a radical ambiguity that excites him, one that could free the historical subject from History. This 'radical ambiguity' was however a cause for anxiety among Western spectators; in 1979, Claire Brière (in Afary and Anderson, 2005:251) challenged Foucault on that point:

> The reaction I've heard most often about Iran is that people don't understand. When a movement is called revolutionary, people in the West, including ourselves, always have the notion of progress, of something that is about to be transformed in the direction of progress. All this is put into question by the religious phenomenon. … Now, I don't know whether you managed, when you were in Iran, to determine, to grasp the nature of that enormous religious confrontation—I myself found it very difficult. The Iranians themselves are swimming in that ambiguity and have several levels of language, commitment, expression, etc.

The 'religious phenomenon' in the revolution does not fill Foucault with skepticism, but is a cause of hope for it has the potential to allow the subject to transform itself, constituting a new mode of subjectivity, outside of the progressive schema of the Enlightenment. Foucault's writings about Iran prioritize this possibility and people's experience of the collective will and political spirituality rather than the immediate outcomes of the revolution, with which he is less concerned. The collective will is directed against the Shah's modernization project, which Foucault sees as itself an *archaism* (Foucault, 2005:195). The current Shah was continuing and outdated model of modernization envisaged by his father in the 1920s, a vision that "neglected

critical elements of modernity dealing with culture and politics: that is, the very complex process dealing with accommodation of social change in the context of the Iranian cultural and historical experience" (Mirsepassi, 1990:87).

Foucault recognizes the various political objectives and interests in the revolution (although he underplays the importance of class, gender, and ethnic cleavages), writing in the November 7th article about student riots that there was

> rivalry between the political and the religious groups. There was on everyone's mind a sort of mutual challenge between revolutionary radicalism and Islamic radicalism, neither of which wanted to seem more conciliatory and less courageous than the other (Foucault, 2005:214).

I return to the rivalry between political and religious groups below. Foucault, however, is more interested in the fact that "the revolt spread without splits or internal conflicts" and that what he witnessed "was not the result of an alliance between various political groups. Nor was it the result of a compromise between social classes. … Something quite different has happened. A phenomenon has traversed the entire people and will one day stop" (Foucault, 2005:256). The unparalleled unity of purpose and mass participation in the revolution happened thanks to the collective will, which, ironically, stopped politics (and its squabbles over constitutional matters, social issues, foreign policy, etc.) from gaining a foothold (Matin, 2013:124). This is why he called the revolution "the most *modern* and most insane", "the first great insurrection against [Western-dominated] global systems" of thought and action (quoted in Yang, 2005). For Foucault, religion was not an inherent obstacle to the revolutionary process, its unfortunate by-product, or its hijacker; it was its *vehicle*.

Religion without metaphysics

Foucault's understanding of religion and the role it played in Iran in 1978/9 must be understood in the wider context of his interest in exploring power-knowledge relationships and his treatment of Christianity. In previous projects, Foucault examined Christianity as a multiplicity of power strategies that create "new forms of subjection" and develop "new power relations" (Jambet, 1992:241). In his writings on pastoral power, confession, sexuality, techniques on the self, madness, etc., "[r]eligion enacts the relations of power and maintains a system of control through the mechanism of authority" (Khatami, 2003:122). The body and what it does/what is being done to it is the site of this struggle. The problematics of religion are therefore not cast in the opposition between body and spirit, secular and religious, material and spiritual, but transcend theological dualisms and focus on the corporeality of power relations and the ways in which technologies of the self require normative docility (Khatami, 2003).

The Iranian Revolution provided Foucault with the first contemporary manifestation of a fusing between religion and spirituality, if by religion we mean an overall phenomenological term used to refer to any organized faith tradition and understand spirituality as "the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false" (Foucault in Carrette, 2000:137). 'Religion' in the context of his writings on Iran does not therefore refer to a dogma (and he does not treat Shi'ism in a dogmatic or doctrinal way), but, to "a form of expression, a mode of social relations, a supple and widely accepted elemental organization, a way of being together, a way of speaking and listening, something that allows one to be listened to by others" (Foucault, 2005:202). Indeed, in Iran Foucault saw Islam as a source of creativity and found Shi'ism to be particularly suited for the kind of work required for the transformation of the subject. Thus he calls for abandoning "every dogmatic principle and question[ing] one by one the validity of all the principles that have been the source of oppression" and developing an "alternative based on Islamic teachings" (Foucault, 2005:185).

It is important to emphasize that Foucault's perspective, although certainly uncommon, was not one simply *projected onto* Iran, a case of wishful thinking of a man desperately searching for a path out of modernity where there was none. His concept of political spirituality was a novel reworking, in part, of Corbin's writings on spiritual corporality in Shi'ite Islam (although he had been thinking about the concept since 1960s, before he encountered Corbin's writings) (Corbin, 1977, Khatami, 2003:123). Additionally, he also references and admires Ali Shariati, the revolution's foremost intellectual. Central to understanding why Foucault saw so much potential for a true liberation of the self on the streets of Iran and in the 'spirit of Islam' is the particular history of Shiism in Iran and Ali Shariati's liberation theology in the context of that history.

Shariati's Shi'ism

Shi'ite Islam has always had considerable militant political egalitarian potential, due to a couple reasons. First, it doctrinally renounces all forms of temporal powers. The Shia doctrine sees the line of Prophet Mohammad's male descendants, the imams, as his legitimate successors, whose power was usurped by the caliphs. Thus, during the period of occultation of the Twelfth Imam, all earthly rulers are usurpers and thus illegitimate. Additionally, within Twelver Shia Islam there is a modicum of democracy, as the *mujtahids*, those who exercise *ijtihad* (jurisprudential contributions to legal literature) are theologically autonomous – no one can tell them their *ijtihad* is wrong (Aysha, 2006:383). In Twelver lore, a central importance has the battle of Karbala, of which always existed multiple interpretations – prior and during the

Pahlavi era, the most dominant one stated that Imam Hussein "surrendered himself like Ishmael in passive submission to the divine will" in the fight against the tyrannical caliph Yazid I – therefore Shiites should practice *taqiyah* (necessary dissimulation) in *intizar* (waiting) for the return of the Hidden Imam, which will liberate Shiism from its oppressors. However, the older sect of Zaydi Shiism, on the other hand, maintained that Imam Hussein fought till the end against insurmountable odds, and so Shiites should abandon *taqiyah* in favour of *qiyam* (revolt, insurrection) (*ibid.*).

However, Shi'ism's extended political marginalization in favour of Sunni Islam, coupled with the fatality of the passive millenarianism present in the first interpretation of battle of Karbala, considerably structurally reduced its anti-status quo belligerency (Matin, 2013:128). In Iran, this process was accelerated by the Safavi dynasty (1501-1721) who co-opted Shi'ism into becoming the state religion. Consequently, the Shia *ulama* assumed privileged positions in educational and judicial bodies, gaining socio-political influence and higher status (*ibid.*:145). Since the 17th century, the Safavis intensified taxation as a means of political accumulation, exempting their own land by turning large swaths of it into charitable institutions (the *waqf*), of which the ulama were the trustees. The subsequent weakening of the centralized state transformed their symbolic trusteeship into *de facto* ownership, which resulted in the ulama's political and economic independence, especially during the Qajar (1791–1925) period. Arjomand (1988) characterizes Iran of this time as having 'double sovereignty' between the clergy and the state that soon came under strain.

Unlike in Sunni countries, in Shi'ism/Iran, the practice of state authority seizing the ulama's *waqf* never existed, and thus the clerics could develop and preserve "an ethic of clerical and popular financial independence" (Aysha, 2006:283). Foucault is aware of that history, correctly identifying that although there were periods of "proximities between the state and Shi'ism" for most of its past Shi'ism played an "unprecedented" role in "fomenting political awareness" and "played an oppositional role" to the state (Foucault, 2005:186). He also points out that at various points in history, revolutionaries tried to "*resurrect* an Alavid Shi'ism" against the more dominant "Safavid Shi'ism" (Foucault, 2005:186). It was 'Alavid Shiism', the Shiism espoused by Ali Shariati, that taught Foucault that "true meaning of Shi'ism should not be sought in a religion that had been institutionalized since the seventeenth century, but in the sermons of social justice and equality that had already been preached by the first imam" (Foucault, 2005:207).

Shariati espoused a particular kind of 'liberation theology' focused on 'reclaiming' a more 'authentic' revolutionary strand of Shi'ism, articulated around the martyrdom of Imam

Hussein and his fight against the oppressor, and building an "intellectually progressive movement as well as a militant social force" (Shariati in Esposito, 1986:xi). Afary and Anderson (2005:60) accuse Shariati of purging the more 'tolerant' interpretations of Islam found in Sufi mysticism, Muslim philosophy and Persian poetry in the name of this supposed 'authenticity', castigating him of being an opportunist fundamentalist seeking power.

However, Shariati's opposition to Safavid Sufism, which Afary and Anderson take as evidence of his intolerance and purging inclinations, was cast in his concern for justice. In wrong hands, Sufism "cast an aura of religiosity over the feudal order of the Seljuqs and Mongols and bound the Muslim people in the chains of predestination", producing a passive populace made complacent (Shariati, 1980:38). Safavid Sufism, Shariati wrote, teaches that "[i]f the world does not agree with you or suit you, you should agree with the world" (Shariati, 1997:3). He contrasts it with the "Quranic mysticism" of Muhammad Iqbal, who encouraged people to "rise against" the world that did not suit them. Shariati's opposition to Safavid Sufism went only insofar as it exploited the hereafter to pacify the population and produced a politics of complacency disconnected from the daily lives and struggles of its believers, a process resulting from the collaborationist history between the state and the clergy. He furthermore "rejected the *systematization* of Gnosticism in the Sufi Orders; that is, he rejected an organizational logic in Sufism, not its embrace of the *plurality* of mystical experiences" (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016:91).

His respect for plurality is also evident in the way he repeatedly praises the "great Eastern religions," where "humanity has a unique relationship with the God of the world" and "God, mankind, and love are all seen as engaged in a sort of scheme to re-create the world of existence" (Shariati, 1980:24). Elsewhere, he praises Hindu "philosophical interpretation of the sanctity of the cow with which none of our books about *touhid* can compare" and admonishes Muslim clerics for not keeping up with Eastern philosophy, which has far surpassed Islam, which in their hands became "something banal and commonplace" (*ibid*.:98-9). Hardly typical of an Islamist fundamentalist.

Not only was Shariati actively seeking inspiration from other religions and praising their value, he also embraced Western political philosophy, calling himself a socialist and appropriating Marxist concepts of 'class struggle, 'classless society', 'capitalist exploitation' and 'imperialism'. He studied Marxism at the Sorbonne, under George Gurvitch, a Jewish ex-communist, and found him to be someone "who had spent all his life fighting against fascism, Stalinist dictatorship and French colonialism in Algeria … closer to the spirit of Shi'ism than Ayatollah Milani" (Rahnema, 2000:123). In the 1970s, Milani forbade his students from

reading Shariati's books and attending his lectures; in a response to the cleric, Shariati (in Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016:91). is infuriated with the passive stance of the clergy in the face of injustice:

> Everybody is asking this question …: Why is it that pious people such as yourself, who [stand] as a source of emulation, have not uttered a word about tyranny in this world? For eight years, the French army bloodied and massacred the Muslims of Algeria … . The enlightened Christian priests in France sympathized with the Algerians. The existentialist Sartre and the antireligion Ms. Simone de Beauvoir defended them and endangered their own lives for the sake of the Algerians' cause. Even the French communist Henri Alleg joined the Algerian resistance … . It perturbs me deeply to witness that a great source of emulation writes on the pages of his book that "the Prophet has advised those who eat melon would go to the heaven!" And then you have the audacity to call me an "unfit element."

The complacent stance of the clergy pushed him as far as to renounce them theologically, calling them an 'unfortunate necessity' that nevertheless had no 'official' standing (Shariati, 1980:11). Further yet, he called "for the expulsion of both the official (*ruhaniyat-e rasmi*) clergy along with the co-opted (*ruhaniyat-e vabasteh*) clergy" (Dorraj, 1990:148). His 'authentic' Shi'ism had therefore nothing to do with "purging external influences" but was about an Islam primarily concerned with liberation, strongly influenced by socialist ideas of justice and various political liberation philosophies. In his support for Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Alleg, and distaste for the passive clergy, it is clear he prioritized personal ethics over religious adherence, recognizing that "progressive policies and politics were more important than religion because a regressive society could drag the most progressive religion down with it" (Aysha, 2006:385).

The perils of an 'Islamic government'

Thank to Shariati's legacy, the differences that existed between Marxist and Muslim groups were not articulated politically as secular and religious divisions, the revolutionaries seeing themselves instead as comrades with the same goal but different ideologies (Matin, 2013:78). In a speech in his defense during a televised trial, Khosrow Golesorkhi (in Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016:79), a communist poet and journalist sentenced to death on trumped-up charges, saw himself as a revolutionary in pursuit of ideals that were not different from that of Islam:

> I begin my defense with the words of Imam Hussein, the greatest martyr of the peoples of the Middle East. As a Marxist-Leninist, I searched for social justice for the first time in the teachings of Islam, and then I found socialism…. In Iran, the true Islam has always fulfilled its duty to the liberation movements. … Today also the true Islam is carrying its responsibility toward our national liberation movement … . As a Marxist I applaud such an Islam, the Islam of Ali, the Islam of Hussein.

Liberation was thus a common project, and the ideological expression of issues of social justice was seldom a point of contention for the various groups within Iranian society at the height of the revolution (except the western-educated Iranian intelligentsia and expats, who – like their European counterparts and teachers, viewed Islam as inherently regressive and oppressive).

Both Marxist and various other left-leaning critics, literary figures, and historians, referred to the Islam of Shariati and Imam Hussein as the source of revolutionary ideals from the riots of 1963 to overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Tensions of course existed, and became particularly pronounced in 1975, when the Muslim leadership of the Iranian Mujahedin suddenly renounced Islam in the newly-released Manifesto and purged the organization from those who refused to conform to this new 'ideological transformation' (Abrahamian, 1989:145). The 'Great Schism' separated families and friends, and even lead to the assassination of one of the Muslim leaders by the new Marxist command (*ibid*.:149). Although the split resulted in two factions, the Marxist one later renamed Peykar, both Mujahedins remained active in armed struggle leading up to the revolution, committed to the idea of liberation. Mojtaba Taleqani, one of the leaders of the Marxists, son of the prominent Ayatollah Taleqani (in Abrahamian, 1989:162), wrote thus to his father to both explain his switch and underline the importance of keeping a united front:

> In the old days, especially in the period of 1969–70, we would dismiss dialectical materialism on the grounds that if one did not believe in the afterlife one would not be willing to make the supreme sacrifice. I now realize that a communist is willing to make the supreme sacrifice precisely because his cause is that of the masses. … Father, I end this letter by stressing that I will resist the regime as you have done, and that I will follow your example to the end.

Abrahamian (1989:149) traces the renunciation of Islam to three developments: the disillusionment with the anti-regime clergy, especially Khomeini (who, despite paying lip service to the liberation of the 'downtrodden' was still thoroughly committed to the idea of private property), their inability to appeal to the modern-educated intelligentsia, and their ongoing dialogue with leftist intelligentsia of the Feda'iyan, political prisoners, and expats. However, by 1978 it was clear that the main mobilizing force behind the revolution was Khomeini, and one could not legitimately participate in the revolutionary struggle having dismissed Islam (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016:82).

Hence Foucault's reference to the 'radical ambiguity' in which the Iranians are submerged; in his view, the dominance of political Islam in the revolutionary discourse had nothing to do with a primordial 'return' to Islam. As a response to both those Marxist

revolutionaries and Western critics, who saw Islam in orientalist terms, Foucault (in Afary and Anderson, 2005:124) writes:

> People always quote Marx and the opium of the people. The sentence that immediately preceded that statement which is never quoted says that religion is the spirit of a world without spirit. Let's say, then, that Islam, in that year of 1978, was not the opium of the people precisely because it was the spirit of a world without a spirit.

Iranians gazed in the abyss of Western nihilism and found it lacking; Islam and political spirituality were the vehicles through which they could articulate an alternative. Consequently, Foucault did not consider the prospect of an Islamic government an inherently oppressive one, writing instead that,

> [Islamic government] is something very old and also very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet, but also of advancing toward a luminous and distant point where it would be possible to renew fidelity rather than maintain obedience. In pursuit of this ideal, the distrust of legalism seemed to me to be essential, along with a faith in the creativity of Islam (Foucault, 2005:206).

Islamic government was thus an 'ideal', the concrete realization of which would require "long work by civil and religious experts, scholars, and believers in order to shed light on all the problems to which the Quran never claimed to give a response." He wonders what an Islamic government would look like in "precisely … in a country like Iran, which has a large Muslim majority but is neither Arab nor Sunni and which is therefore less susceptible than some to Pan-Islamism or Pan-Arabism?" (Foucault, 2005:205). This peculiar character of Iran, Foucault says, gives the wish for 'Islamic government' a "particular coloration" (*ibid*.).

We now know that the 'particular coloration' turned out to be a theocracy. With the benefit of hindsight, there are pronouncements in Foucault's writings that can leave one with no sympathy for his overall analysis, among them are the oft-quoted, "Khomeini is *not there*. … Khomeini *says nothing*, nothing other than no – to the shah, to the regime, to dependency. Finally, Khomeini *is not a politician*. There will be no Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government" and "One thing must be clear. By 'Islamic government' nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clerics would have role of supervision or control" (Foucault, 2005:226, 206, respectively). Writing in October and November 1978, at the time when revolutionary fervour was sweeping the country, Foucault might have also been enchanted by the spell of revolutionary consciousness. Clearly, some people *did* mean precisely that kind of government, Khomeini among them.

Khomeini the fundamentalist?

It is easy to denounce Khomeini as simply a 'crazed fundamentalist' and a medieval demagogue leading a similarly backward populace in a crusade against modernity. However, such a view fails to see that his political project was not "simply a religious crusade obsessed with scriptural texts, spiritual purity, and theological dogma", but is better characterized as "flexible political movement expressing socio-economic grievances" (Abrahamian, 1993:3). This is not to deny the importance of religion for Khomeini or his supporters; but rather to point out that he was a shrewd and skilled populist who expertly played on the 'radical ambiguity' Foucault identified in the revolutionary movement. To reduce the reign of terror and repression that followed 1979 simply as an inherent feature of Islamic politics or to the figure of Khomeini severely undermines our ability to understand how revolutionary movements cave in to the challenges of post-revolutionary power consolidation and *realpolitik* of state-building.

Khomeini's position was anything but fundamentalist, if by fundamentalist we mean insisting on a strict literal interpretation of religious texts; his ideas about the shape of the revolution and the post-revolutionary order evolved throughout his life and were not even clear *after* the revolution (Abrahamain, 1993). As a junior cleric, he published *Kashf al-Asrar* (The Unveiling of Secrets) in 1943, in which he advocated a pro-monarchy accomodationist position (providing a scathing critique but essentially affirming the legitimacy of monarchy as such), fully in line with the quietist Shia (and Sunni) doctrine of primacy of order over chaos. According to this position, a bad government is better than no government, and the people should submit to sovereign for he provides security to the *ummah*, the religious community.

Khomeini's quietist positon in regards to the state and monarchy remained unchanged until the 1970s, and he was willing to accommodate the monarchy even during the demonstrations of 1963, when he was the regime's most vocal and prominent critic. He did not articulate a new theory of the state or political Islam until 1970, when he published *Velayat-e Faqih: Hokumat-e Islami* (The jurist's guardianship: Islamic government), advancing the viewpoint that Islam is thoroughly incompatible with monarchy and giving reasons for theocratic rule by the religious judges (Abrahamian, 1993:24-5). Khomeini's views on society advanced in line with his views on the state – pre-1970, he preached the quietist doctrine that so infuriated Shariati: the poor should accept their fate, the wealthy thank God, give generously to the poor, and avoid gluttony. In the 1970s, he makes explicit use of the notion of 'class' and builds his speeches around exploiting class antagonisms, particularly making use of the word *mostazafin,* which in traditional Quranic sense meant 'meek' or 'humble' used in reference orphans, widows, and the mentally ill. Khomeini uses it in the sense of the 'downtrodden' and

'exploited masses', juxtaposing them with the palace dwellers, the rich, the upper and aristocratic class.

Two caveats must be made here. First, Khomeini developed his ideas at a time social tensions in Iran ran high: disenfranchised peasants flocked to the shantytowns in cities, small businessmen were feeling threatened by corporations owned by the centralized state, and further, the Shah, bolstered by oil revenues, was encroaching upon the clerical establishment (Mirsepassi, 2000:74). Second, he very rarely made any reference do doctrinal issues during his speeches in the 1970s, and not at all after his return from exile; so much so, that "[s]ome of his lay allies later complained that this avoidance had been part of a devious clerical scheme to dupe the public. … Whatever the reasons, some of Khomeini's lay advisers, such as Sadeq Qotbzadeh, were ignorant enough of the concept that they were completely bewildered when they heard it for the first time months after the revolution" (Abrahamain, 1993:30).

At the same time as he was quiet about doctrine, his speeches were built around exploiting populistic notions; he accused the Shah for widening the gap between the rich and the poor, corruption, expanding bureaucracy, wasting oil reserves, making Iran depend on the US, spreading its morally corrupt ideology; Islam was in danger from Western imperialism and Zionism. At the same time, Khomeini "was careful to respect private property and avoid concrete proposals that would undermine the petty bourgeoisie" (Abrahamian, 1993:38). The rapid development of urban centres under the Pahlavi regime and the social stratification that resulted from the uneven capitalist development, coupled with the oil boom of the 70s that only exacerbated economic inequality made the populace very receptive to such populist rhetoric (Mirepassi, 2000:75). Hence the comment Foucault made about Khomeini 'not being there' and 'speaking nothing' – his rhetoric and personal charisma Foucault saw as the focal point of the people, someone to unite them, but not substantial enough to rule.

Khomeini's populism reached its zenith during his exile in Paris, when he not only gave constitutional grounds for the government to come, but articulated it as a *republican* one, based on the sovereignty of the people. In his October 1, 1978 article "Is the Shah a Hundred Years Behind the Times?" Foucault (Foucault, 2005:195) rightly points out that any pretence to legitimacy has been lost by the Shah, and thus the previously-popular liberal constitutionalist slogan 'let the king reign but not govern' is no longer tenable. Recognizing that, Khomeini revised his position, articulating for the first time on October 14 the idea of an Islamic Republic. When asked by a *Le Monde* reporter about the character of an 'Islamic Republic', Khomeini (in Galligan and Versteeg, 2013:345) answered,

> Our republic has the same meaning as anywhere else. We call it "Islamic Republic" because the conditions of its emergence are embedded in Islam, but the choice belongs to the people. The meaning of the republic is the same as any other republics in the world.

On January 12, 1979, Khomeini announced the plans for a formation of a Council of the Islamic Revolution, whose first task would be "[t]he formation of a Constituent Assembly composed of the elected representatives of the people in order to discuss and approve the new Constitution of the Islamic Republic" (Algar, 2015:preface). Practical steps were taken, with Khomeini appointing a Sorbonne-educated jurist, Hassan Habibi of Gaullist French republican tradition, in charge of writing the constitution. The draft was revised by the Provisional Council of Ministers under the leadership of Yadollah Sahabi, a prominent liberal politician, and the document was pushed more in the social-democratic direction (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016:101). It added provisions about women's rights, social justice, and limits to private ownership of industry. Khomeini continued to publicly favour the constitution, and indeed remained faithful to his 1978 Paris commitment until September 12, 1979, when the *Velayat faqih* was adopted instead. Its adoption, however, was not a natural and inevitable outcome of the religious character of the revolution or a foreseeable result of Khomeinism. The consolidation of power post-revolution, in other words, was not a manifested inherent feature of Islamism, but a result of and a response to *particular events,* something Foucault understood clearly.

Conclusion

Did Foucault really commit a 'grave mistake' in his writings on the Iranian Revolution? Did he prioritize a premodern, romanticized past, over a secular modernity? Was he truly 'another botched Orientalist'? I have tried to argue that he was perhaps one of the few Western observers who truly understood the revolution in its unique singularity. He refused to subject it to historical determinism or reductionist view of Islam and its supposed inherent 'fascist core'. For Foucault, the revolutionary experience and the process of becoming, the transformation of subjectivity, could not be condemned and their significance diminished because of the bloody regime in which they ultimately resulted. Unlike Western critics and scholars, Foucault refused to see the revolution in terms of exclusive dichotomies of modern/traditional, Islamic/secular, etc. He saw it as a moment of historical rupture which presented possibilities of new political engagements and projects; of doing politics and life differently. Events such as the uprisings of 2011 would benefit greatly from Foucault's scholarly approach of 'respecting singularity'; seeing them as a phenomenon both of History and one that defies it. Dubbed the 'Arab Spring', the revolts entered a space in which they could be made *legible;* pundits and experts

subsequently made them into events with a written past and a clear, legible direction. There exists a worrying complacency in the 'Western world' about authoritarianism in the Middle East, now that the events of 2011 did not yield the 'expected' (from a teleological viewpoint) results; we have subjected them to historical inevitabilities built on lazy and essentialist views about Islam, the 'Arab mind', but also the desirability of the project of Western modernity. "One must be respectful when a singularity arises and intransigent as soon as the state violates universals," Foucault tells us. Seeing the Iranian revolution as precisely this kind of singularity, he considered its duty as a 'historian of the present' to listen; as it is a duty to listen to anyone who is ready to die in the fight against power's most brutal manifestations. One should not reject or condemn the phenomenon one sees because of its religious character. "The first condition for approaching [Islam] with a minimum of intelligence is not to begin by bringing in hatred," Foucault (2005:210) tells us. Thirty-seven years after, we do not seem to have learned that lesson.

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