

Iran Archived: A Defence of Foucault against his Detractors

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Abstract

What would motivate a first-rank poststructuralist philosopher to engage suddenly with journalism? Generally speaking, journalism is associated with superficial intellectual productions, making alliance to it unappealing to professional philosophers. Then, what would make a well-acknowledged French philosopher of language like Michel Foucault take his 1978-79 Iran-adventure which cost him his reputation and left him severely wounded by harsh critiques so that, from June 1979 until his untimely death in 1984, he avoided talking publically about Iran. The liberal intellectual milieu, outside and inside France, blamed him for supporting the rise of *wilayat-al-faqih* (the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) in Iran. Re-reading Foucault's Iranian Writings forty years after their first publication, this paper argues that Foucault's focal interest in Iran was totally misunderstood. He had nothing to do with the Islamic government, rather he sought after a genuine understanding of the rudimental issues that united the majority of Iranian people. Working methodically through Foucault's fragmentary writings on Iran as 'historico-philosophic' archives, a new understanding of their technologies, knowledge, discourse, politics, and practices is sought.

Key Words:

Foucault, Iran, archive, power, bio-power, ethics, political spirituality, pastoral power

Nothing is more important in the history of a people than the rare moments when it rises up collectively in order to bring down a regime that it no longer support.

Foucault's open letter to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, April 14, 1979.

Introduction:

What did Foucault say in his Iranian Writings? What did not he say, or better, what did he avoid saying? It is quite surprising that throughout his Iranian Writings, which thanks to Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson (2005) we can read their entire English version,¹ Foucault had never used the word revolution or he used it between quotation marks. He was mainly concerned with the rapid formation of a 'collective will' that worked out the political struggle of the Iranian '*populaire movement*.' Hired as a special correspondent of the *Corriere della sera* in the fall of 1978, two major issues busied the readers' worry at that time: Carter's America and Iran in the last year of Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi's reign. Dedicatedly, he chose to be involved with the second issue and made it his own battle, but what did he support exactly in all his newspaper reports, opinion pieces, open letters, and interviews that were published between September 1978 and May 1979, the span of the Iranian *event*? For whom and about whom did he write these dispatches?

Throughout his *œuvre*, Foucault was involved with politics, saying: "the very definition of an intellectual comprises a person who necessarily is entangled with the politics and major decisions of his society." During the 1970s, 'a new diagnosis of the present,'² was

his main occupation, but his ardent emotional integration with the Iranian 'unarmed demonstrators' who kept confronting a despotic regime that 'machine-gunned them in thousands' was a distinctive stance in his philosophic career. Although he publically supported Vietnam and Cambodia, and demonstrated to support the Polish government against the solidarity of Trade Union, his powerful support of Iran remains unequalled. He attempted, by reading about Iran, visiting it two times and making interviews with Iranian political activists, to understand the genuine reasons that unite 'the general will of the people.' His sole concern in the Iranian Writings was to study the inclinations of the angry Iranians, and their revolt against an authoritative political *power* became very insightful to his newly coined terms: *bio-power* and *bio-politics*. Contrary to what his detractors considered as Foucault's irresponsible support of Islamic 'fundamentalist theocracy,' he attempted to pursue his previous 'critique of Western subjectivity' by eulogizing the virtues and liberal potentialities of an 'Oriental Other.'³ His interaction with the Iranian affair came as a natural development of his prior philosophic discourse. So contrary to what his critics think, there is no gap between what Foucault had already said in his academic writings and his Western discourse on Iran.

He sought to instantiate 'conceptual journalism' as a philosophical method to investigate the Iranian *event*. However, the *event* is different from *saying* it. He *says the event* of Iran in his own way, employing essential tools of 'journalistic industry' to *say* his version of the Iranian story. Thus, forty years after their publication, Foucault's Iranian Writings can be *read* as historical archives. This paper argues that using the technologies of the archive to *read* Foucault's Iranian writings can re-shape our *interpretation* of this public document. Opening the archives stored in Foucault's Iranian Writings, we find that they are not regulated by hegemonic political power, they are not tools for 'governing and policing.'⁴ They provide a neutral source of information intended to address the general public by using 'documentary journalism' as the most widely known information technology available at that time. Hence, our *hermeneutic* method to approach Foucault's Iranian Writings is archaeological, archival, or historico-philosophical. This documentary or historic method produces an unprecedented *reading* of Foucault's Writings on Iran.

The Memory of the Archive

The archive, generally speaking, is a 'residual material,' or 'a knowledge system' that allows more 'contemporaneity and dynamism.'⁵ Foucault was one of the first philosophers who institutionalized the archive as "*the general system of the formation and transformation of statements.*"⁶ He says that *discourse* does not have a meaning or truth only, but an always developing history of discursive practices. In this sense, discourse can be grasped according to the historical development of its teleological possibilities/impossibilities because, during different periods of this development, discursive practices either accept and put into practice or deny and exclude certain meanings of one and the same discourse. Thus reading Foucault's Iranian archives retrospectively is greatly significant not only to decipher their symptomatic meaning(s) in our present time, but to examine and analyze the policing techniques used to re-adjust and detour the cultural, religious, and political routes which were registered/stored in them.

Despite the fact that his detractors tried hard to regulate the meaning(s) of his discourse on Iran, Foucault considered himself responsible as an *intellectual* to speak the truth in newspapers, and to comment on events and political questions that concern a huge bulk of readership. In his conversation with Gilles Deleuze, Foucault says: "the intellectual speaks the

truth to those who had yet to see it, in the name of those who were forbidden to speak the truth."⁷ So he was very enthusiastic to let the long imprisoned voice of the Iranian 'cassette tapes movement' be heard in Europe and North America. As a prophet, he saw a new light coming from the East, teaching the West that reached dead ends with Marxism original visions of the future. He roamed throughout the stormy streets of Tehran and Qom, searching for justifications to the uncanny of the 'collective unconscious' that assembled the absolutely different Iranians suddenly under one hand and one Mind. He was also fascinated by the miracle of giving a voice to the long silenced people and excavated what were the specific regularities that composed them together in accordance to unforeseen national/Islamic relations that might threaten the West. For him the Iranian *event* put Western politics at point zero. So any politician with integrity had to abandon all dogmatic principles that led to the oppression of other people, and begin anew to rethink political theories "according to the vision and principles of good government."

Foucault's main concern was to investigate the essential constituents of the Iranian 'collective memory' which enforced a significant historical moment of 'rupture and discontinuity,' an 'incident of interruption' to centuries of sedimentary despotism. As a matter of fact, history has its own mysterious workings, moments in which human beings experience the phenomena of discontinuity to long periodization. During these moments of drastic change, the collective mentality (single Mind) and the collective will (single Hand) become our focal interest. Beneath the great continuities of time, we can detect moments of interruption which forces man to enter a new *time* inside time. These moments of historical shifts are far from silent beginnings, they are precursors foreshadowing a new type of rationality in which the old conceptual systems are transformed so that a new history would be written after these moments of change. When the present moment is changed, it requires a new system of knowledge in order to detach man from his past ideologies. In his Iranian Writings, Foucault sought to have an historical analysis of that *present* moment of change in Iran, tracing a single pattern which unites the different minds in order to rebuild their foundational knowledge and action. So regarding Foucault as a pro-Islamic precursor, his detractors encourage deflectively an oblivion of his unavoidable Western enunciative positivity. His archaeological approach is nothing but the 'epistemological foundations' on which the grand 'Western discourse has been constructed'.⁸ In his *The Order of Things*, as in his *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality*, he provided evidences of how official knowledge "makes some things possible and others impossible, permits us to say some things but makes other things impossible."⁹ In all his works, including his Iranian Writings, he speaks to the West, and about the West even when he shows the West its Eastern Other. However, as Easterners, we can decipher Foucault's Iranian archives from "a privileged region: at once close to us, and different from our present existence, it is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us." Their metaphysical presence/absence enables us to extend upon these Writings and interrogate whether they have a predetermined starting point or a destination? They return to us as a revenant, or the spectral return of the dead/living voice that is dismissed, but cannot be kept silent in death for ever.

Archons/Counter-Archons

Foucault challenged the mainstream archons (the archive keepers/writers/interpreters) who were very careful of what is to be *written* of Iranian history and what should be left oral, or subjected to speculation and uncertainty. The Iranian *event* can be divided into two types of order: sequential and jussive, or the *event* according to nature and the *event* according to the law. The *event* is first let to go naturally, then it is *detoured* by men and gods, or *men as gods* who command the archives to be *appropriated* in a certain way. In this sense, men are turned into *things* re-written according to 'the archons, those who commanded.'¹⁰ As Archons or intellectuals in charge, Foucault's critics argue that they have 'the Word' and the Iranians have 'the use of it.' They accused Foucault for not joining their *interpretational* perspective. They were unable to see the naked truth as Foucault saw it in the streets of Iran. They still have this Greco-Latin gaze over their Oriental *Other* up, supposing that they possess the right to make or to represent the *law*. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence of the official documents. They have the power to interpret the archives and legislate international laws according to their own interpretation.

Assuming a counter-archon role, Foucault's readers can see what he worked hard to detect, but his critics were blind to see it: the traumatized mob, those who refused what Others have made of them. This is the kind of a 'wretched' who is 'ready for violence at all times,' says Frantz Fanon.¹¹ The 'consideration of violence,' in general, led to Fanon's meditation on the notion of 'spontaneity' as a phenomenon that distinguishes between 'the leaders' and 'the mass of people.' He basically rummages through what mobilizes the masses to take action, to resist the tyranny of administration. The people are usually marginalised and distrusted as a Cartesian body of 'fruitless inertia;' their consciousness was considered 'irrational', so they were reduced into less-than-animal level by their national privileged elites who think that they can be orchestrated and played on easily. But, as in 1978-Iran, suddenly the explosion took place and popular struggle became the only tangible reality. For Hannah Arendt, this sort of movement is an illegitimate violence. What gives legitimacy to violence is a wider concept which is 'power,' or the 'consensus of the majority.' Legitimate violence is "a last resort to keep the power structure intact against individual challengers - the foreign enemy, the native criminal - it looks indeed as though violence were the prerequisite of power."¹² Thus power itself gives legitimacy to violence, but when violence threatens the super-structure of power, what the majority agree upon for a long time, it becomes illegitimate, and when violence destroys all power and remains in control, it turns into terror. For Arendt, power and violence are binary oppositions that in the political paradigm of Hegel and Marx cannot destroy each other, but smoothly develop into each other to create an ideal dialectic. Arendt's bizarre logic to justify the power/submission binary sheds light on the reasons that led to the furious critique against Foucault's Iranian Writings. His detractors intended to keep on with the general Western consensus, blaming Foucault for all the errors of the 1979-Iranian aftermath. Power provides Foucault's detractors with agency. It enabled them to subjugate knowledge and allowed historical records to be interpreted or read in a specific way. Foucault was aware of "the increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourse;"¹³ nevertheless, he put into circulation a discourse that challenges the liberal democratic right of punishing any political system different from it.

The difference between the Western thought and its 'largely unknown and untried' Eastern Other is rendered by Emmanuel Levinas' philosophic treatise, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. In this book, Levinas makes a distinction between the Western "totalizers who are satisfied with themselves and with the systems they can organize around

themselves as they already are," and "those who are dissatisfied, and who strive for what is other than themselves, the infinitizers."¹⁴ The latter seek a higher quality of life other than power and hegemony. If the attitude of revolutionary Iranians coincides with the infinitizers who fight for freedom and creative advance, Foucault's critics insist on totalistic notions of power and control over nature and other people. They were unable to see Foucault's conventional judgement that oppression is one of the most 'productive' strategies of human life, "giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour."¹⁵

For Foucault, political power and the kind of knowledge available are interactive. Knowledge is constituted and rationalities are established by hegemonic political power(s). The epistemic system is constructed by its conditions of possibility. So *reading* any text interrogatively, one has to search for a profoundly altering understanding of the *present being of things* as they are presented in the text itself. In this sense, the 1978-Iran can be considered as a *text* which was *read* differently by Foucault and his critics, contributing various discourses to one and the same *text*. Each one of them defined his particular 'conceptual or theoretical coherence.'¹⁶ Their 'questions of authentication' are also paradoxical. Their authenticity is contextualized by *different* points of view, which *differed* contradictory *meaning(s)* at different times and for different readers. So forty years of paradoxical types of readership give the Iranian Writings the prerequisites of *différance*, an infinite relationship between *text* and *meaning/being*.

Starting with Simone de Beauvoir and Maxime Rodinson, the eminent Middle East specialist, Foucault's detractors accused him of supporting Iranian women humiliation and the 'revival of Islamic fundamentalism.'¹⁷ They set themselves responsible for communicating 'information.' 'We wish to inform ourselves,' says Beauvoir, 'then wish to inform others.'¹⁸ This is exactly the same mission that Foucault carried out in his Iranian course of action, he went to Tehran to gather information, to be well-informed of the Iranian situation. He put himself in direct contact with the general Iranian people "in order to know their demands and the ways in which they plan to struggle." He, contrary to his critics' convictions and theories, found that Iranian unscarfed/proto-modernist women as well as unaligned/liberal Muslim young men were supportive of the Iranian resistance as enthusiastically as anybody else involved. So, while his detractors could not forget that they were parts of the Western information machine, Foucault *said* the Iranian *event* from anti-hegemonic point of view. He interpreted the 1978-Iran according to what the Iranians *said*. He reproduced their own *reading* of their own situation and not according to how the West *read* them, or wanted to *contextualize their reading*. He did not restrict his Iranian discourse to the techniques of women's dress, or the Islamic government that ruled after the Shah. The way people clothe themselves is region-based and governed by 'clothing traditions.'¹⁹ Women can be very liberal even though they are covered or veiled. With the veil, national and religious *things* are defined as they are without converting the woman to foreign values, or violating regional culture. In the same way, he saw that not all Iranian demonstrators were religious fanatics or fundamentalists. He celebrated that historical moment in which the Iranians were shouting the names of both Ayatollah Khomeini, the icon of the 'Islamic revolution' and its uncompromising aftermath leader as well as Ali Shariati, the Sorbonne graduate, political activist, and liberal religious-socialist thinker.

However, the Beauvoir/Rodinson-like critiques did not stop, recent interpreters of Foucault's Iranian Writings, like Alain Beaulieu, Andrew Dilts, and Eric Paras, criticized him of turning away from much of his previous work on 'power' towards 'ethics,' 'political

spirituality,' or 'pastoral power.'²⁰ However, in her "Ambivalent Modernities: Foucault's Iranian Writings Reconsidered," Corey McCall gives an insightful *reading* of the Iranian Writings by connecting them with "Foucault's writings and lecture courses from this period."²¹ McCall links the Iranian Writings with Foucault's course of lectures at the College de France during the years 1977-79 which were collected and published as *Security, Territory, Population*. During his courses, Foucault's lecturing amphitheatres was crowded with French and foreign students, teachers, researchers and curious listeners. This acquaintance with the audience foreshadows his future engagement with the readers of public newspapers. In this course of lectures, he shifted from *power* to *bio-power*, which is "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power."²² This theoretical discourse argues that there is a "serious and fundamental relation between struggle and truth;" thus, he was absorbed by the Iranian people's revolt and searched dedicatively for the logical reasons that inspired this mysterious 'populaire movement.'

Religion vs. Religion

Long before Islamo-phobic campaigners, Foucault noticed the profound role of religion in making political and social awakening, and maintaining political consciousness. He reflected on the spiritual incentive, which lies behind "the revolt of a people where each one risked everything for an entirely different world." Beside economic stark discrimination and the SAVAK terrorizing strategies, the matter of the 1978/9-rushing into the streets of Iran was stirred by the spirit of 'revolutionary religion,' Islam in its Shi'ite version. It is a Utopian theocratic scheme based on spiritualized past that was able to transform different forms of desolation, depression, hardship, hatred and discontent into a new *power* against hegemonic power. It is a means of historical transformation and political awakening because Shi'ism was and always will be "a form of expression, a mode of social relations..., a way of being together, a way of speaking and listening, something that allows one to be listened to by others, and to yearn for something with them at the same time as they yearn for it." It is a version or *reading* of Islam whose patriarchal head-figures (Imam Ali and his son, Imam Hussein) "never ceased to give an irreducible strength from the depths of a people that can oppose state power." At the beginning, Foucault was vastly influenced by the faith of the Iranian people and their fascination with martyrdom not victory. He realized that they did not yearn for nihilistic death, but they 'care about the dead.' The living Shi'ites hold out their hands to the dead because they attach them to "the permanent obligation of justice," "the struggle that is necessary for right to triumph."

Foucault drew a direct comparison between Shi'ism as the 'instigator,' the starter of political revolutions and "some of the religious movements in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, up to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." These great popular movements against cruel feudalism, the early formations of middle-class finance lords, and all absolute state control were motivated by religious movements which "supported the right to individual conscience and the independence of small religious groups, which wished to be together, having their organizations, without hierarchy or social stratification between them" "These movements," says Foucault, "are religious because they are political and political because they are religious.... I therefore think that the history of religions, and their deep connection to politics, ought to be thought anew." His reconsideration of the interactive relationship between religion and politics contradicts Marx's saying: 'Religion is the opium of the people;' "the phrase that makes the Iranians sneer the most, the one that seems to them the stupidest,

the shallowest," says Foucault in his dialogue with Baqir Parham. In Islam, as in Christianity, the kind of religion that absorbed people's political activity resulted from religious alliances with political powers. It makes rebellious activists subdue and preaches them to accept their fate irresistibly. This is the kind of religion that Shariati called 'religion of legislation.'²³ It is a religion which legitimizes social, economic, gender, and racial hierarchies. In fact, it is this kind of religion which should be rejected as the 'opium of the people.' Shariati drew the line of demarcation not between 'religion' and 'non-religion,' but between two types of religion itself: religion of action and religion of inaction. Political power is always terrified by the unexpected ways of the religion of action so it collates with submissive religion or religion of inaction. However, active religion does not serve positive ends all the time. In the last decades, the historical drama of the Muslim people shows that Islamic fundamentalism, an active *reading* of Islam makes both Muslims and non-Muslims terrified.

Conclusions

Foucault's main concern is not 'revolution,' but the 'absolutely collective will' that underlies it. "The collective will," says Foucault in his interview with Claire Briere and Pierre Blanchet, "is a political myth with which jurists and philosophers try to analyse or to justify institutions, etc. It's a theoretical tool: nobody has ever seen the 'collective will.'" "The collective will," Foucault continued, "was like God, like the soul, something one would never encounter." It is not an everyday scene to witness all people pursuing one and only one goal. In the case of 1978/9-Iran, the main goal was the departure of the Shah, regardless of what would happen after that. For Foucault, what give the Iranian *event* "such beauty... is that there is only one confrontation: between the entire people and the state threatening it with its weapons and police." He dealt with the Iranian demonstrations as an awesome semiotic sign whose literal meaning is that 'a people was tirelessly demonstrating its will,' but, in its deep connotation, the repeated demonstrations deposed the Shah from his legitimacy, authenticity, and sovereignty. In their persistent demonstrations, the Iranians sought to change themselves as much as they wanted to change the Shah's reign. They sought to change their "way of being, their 'relationship with others, with things, with eternity, with God, etc.'" The 'radical revolution' happened when this change in their way of thinking and being took place. "I believe," says Foucault, "that it is here that Islam played a role.... Religion for them was like the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity... and already gave them their identity."

In my opinion, contrary to what his detractors thought, Foucault's support of the Iranian revolution stopped when the Shah left Iran. In this same moment, the revolutionary phenomenon disappeared for Foucault. The collective will to revolt stopped, and all that remained in the post-revolution era were "the different political calculations that each individual had had in his head the whole time." At the beginning, he was an ardent enthusiast of 'Islamic religion as a revolutionary force,' which instigated action. Religion for him is the people's desire to "renew their entire existence by going back to a spiritual experience that they thought they could find within Shi'ite Islam itself." He was after 'the revolutionary experience itself,' and religion was important for him in so far as it motivated this experience. What worried him was that this 'unitary movement' might be lost and die. He was looking forward to see the Iranians seeking "their future in an Islam whose new face they will have to shape with their own hands." He was quite suspicious of an 'Islamic government' after the people's revolution. In his open letter to Mehdi Bazargan, the first Iranian Prime Minister after dethroning the Shah, Foucault says there is no need to add the adjective 'Islamic' to the

word 'government;' the adjective determines certain obligations to the word. If the Iranian government acquired Islamic identity, it would be subjected into 'supplementary obligations.' And unless it respects these obligations, the mob would use the very religion that it shares with the government to rise against it. For him, the same moment religion succeeds to change the political situation, its role stops. However, it must always remain as a vigilant mentor of the political process, always carrying an oppositional role.

Notes

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ايران مؤرشفة: دفاع عن فوكو ضد معارضيهِ
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الملخص

ما الذي يمكن أن يحفز فيلسوفاً على الانخراط المفاجئ مع الصحافة؟ بشكل عام ، ترتبط الصحافة بالإنتاجات الفكرية السطحية ، مما يجعلها غير جذابة للفلاسفة المحترفين، فما الذي يجعل الفيلسوف الفرنسي المعروف ميشيل فوكو يأخذ مغامرته الإيرانية في ١٩٧٨-١٩٧٩ والتي كلفته سمعته وتركته مصاباً بجروح نفسية خطيرة بسبب الانتقادات القاسية ، وذلك من يونيو ١٩٧٩ حتى وفاته المفاجئة في عام ١٩٨٤ ، حيث تجنب التحدث علناً عن إيران. ألقى الوسط الفكري اليساري ، خارج فرنسا وداخلها ، باللوم على فوكو لدعمه ولاية الفقيه (وصاية الفقيه الإسلامي) في إيران. عند إعادة قراءة كتابات فوكو الإيرانية بعد أربعين عاماً من نشرها لأول مرة ، تقول هذا البحث إن اهتمام فوكو الأساسي بإيران قد أسيء فهمه تماماً. لم يكن له أي علاقة بالحكومة الإسلامية ، بل سعى لفهم حقيقي للقضايا البدائية التي توحد غالبية الشعب الإيراني. من خلال العمل المنهجي من خلال كتابات فوكو المجزأة حول إيران كمحفوظات "تاريخية فلسفية" ، يتم التماس فهم جديد لتقنياتهم ومعرفتهم وخطابهم وسياساتهم وممارساتهم.

