

Critique of Foucault on Iran

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"Khomeini and the 'Primacy of the Spiritual'" was intended as a clarification amid what I thought was a wave of confusion. At any rate, it still bears witness to the atmosphere among the leftist (and sometimes rightist) European and American intelligentsia, during and immediately after the period when the Iranian Revolution toppled the shah under the banner of Shi'ite Islam.

Gradually, as the revolt developed in Iran in 1977 and 1978 (see "Islam Resurgent?" app., 223–38), these leftist intellectuals had turned their attention in this direction, with greater and greater intensity. The hope for a world revolution that would abolish exploitation and the oppression of man by man, for a long time dead or moribund, resurfaced, timidly at first and then with more assurance. Could it have been that this hope now found itself incarnated in the most unexpected way in the Muslim Orient, up to now a not very promising location for it; and more precisely, in this old man lost in a universe of medieval thought?

High-flying intellectuals hurled themselves toward an Iran that was on fire. They wanted to see with their own eyes, to witness then and there this astonishing revolutionary process, to study it and to scrutinize it. Over there, Iranian intellectual friends, or friends of friends, took them in hand.

The latter were intoxicated by a struggle that was making gains every day. Soon, it would be the intoxication of victory. Every day brought new evidence of the mobilizing power of Islamic slogans and of the charisma of the one who embodied them most energetically, Ayatollah Khomeini. Under these slogans, barehanded crowds faced machine-guns and rifles.

Success leads to success. Increasingly, Iranian liberal democrats and Marxists asked themselves whether they had not made a mistake, whether they had not been wrong to dismiss their people's expressions of traditional religious fervor. Gaining more and more confidence in the efficacy of religious slogans, they increasingly sought to read into them at least a form of their own aspirations. They conferred on them a political and social meaning that corresponded to their expectations. They communicated their new confidence to their European visitors, who were impressed and even astonished, and who forced themselves to become familiar as quickly as possible with a mental climate of which they had been profoundly ignorant.

The establishment of the new government in February 1979 only increased the interest of Western intellectuals. Their trips to Iran multiplied, just as did, incidentally, the number of newspaper correspondents on the spot. The Iranian counterparts of these Western intellectuals exulted, intoxicated with their victory, but also found themselves gripped by the whirlwind of struggle and tensions that usually takes place in the aftermath of a revolution. The struggle for power was quickening, according to a most classic process: the effervescence of divergent or opposing ideas, of theses and antitheses, which must quickly lead to physical confrontations in the streets. This is a law.

Among contending forces, the eternal struggle for power often uses as its weapons conceptual tools that have been forged through theoretical virtuosity, whether these tools arose during the struggle or whether they were already there, available for such use. Those who love theory can be moved by the desire to place themselves deliberately in the vanguard, or (more rarely) by purely intellectual inclinations. Their creations are greedily seized upon, especially in this magma, by those who display forms of thought or speech capable of rousing the crowds and leading them to the next level. This convergence of personal ambitions and talents, even of virtuosity in the field of theoretical elaboration, normally produces rift upon rift, split upon split, opposition of options and programs, often very artificially, but often also as an expression of contradictory tendencies suggested in equal measure by one side or the other of social reality.

Alongside or ahead of Khomeini—and here differing with his traditional ideology—Iranian intellectuals had tried to develop a doctrine that was in practice oriented toward European notions of revolution, often socialist ones. At the same time, they integrated into this doctrine formulas that retained, unevenly, a fidelity to the Muslim religion. The sincerity of their attachment to Islam was also very uneven. In Machiavellian fashion, some of them saw, in the Muslim forms that had been retained, first and foremost a way to win

the masses over to ideas unfamiliar to them. Others really believed that ideas drawn from European socialist, neo-Marxist, or liberal concepts were implied, even if only potentially and in a specific language that it was necessary to learn and decipher, in the heart of Islam's very foundations, or maybe (here a specifically Iranian variation) in those of Shi'ite Islam.

However, as early as the official inauguration of the new government in Tehran, the form that it took and the decisions that it made gave rise to worries among those who had struggled the most to clear a path for it. Little by little, they decided to communicate their concerns to their European friends. And the latter, moreover, were increasingly shaken by doubts themselves. Less and less could they blind themselves to the struggle for power at the top and its stakes, whose relationship to any ideals was very doubtful. Similarly, they were blinded less and less to the increasingly dangerous trends concerning values they cherished, trends that could be discerned more and more clearly among some of those whose mobilizing power or ascendancy over the controls of the new state was the most powerful, with Ayatollah Khomeini at the top. The ayatollah, who possessed many types of charisma, was not long in revealing completely his leanings toward the darkest forms of cultural archaism; toward traditional methods of government, concealed without very much intellectual honesty by the green coat of Islam; and by his serene indifference to the sufferings caused by his senile stubbornness and his vindictive fury. Writing at the beginning of February 1979 and still being cautious, I evoked Torquemada. These doubts were cleared up all too soon. A sadism that initially used as its alibi the idea of serving the supreme interest of his people or of humanity, or, with greater force, that of an avenging God, or of sending his victims as quickly as possible before divine justice, was increasingly visible in his truncated mental universe. With his blessing, his subordinates quickly rolled up their sleeves, torturing with pleasure the shackled bodies of those who had been imprisoned or condemned to death. A man of religion, Mullah Khalkhali,¹²⁸ quickly became an international celebrity in this way, worthy of eclipsing the centuries-old renown of the terrible Spaniard.

But it takes a long time to extinguish hope. For a long while, Iranian intellectuals, including the most open and the most liberal, held onto the conviction that the dynamics of the revolutionary process would end in the triumph of the conceptions that had guided those intellectuals when it began.

Philosophically formed minds, even and perhaps especially the most eminent, are among the most vulnerable to the seductions of theoretical slogans, which they can easily flesh out with magnificently elaborated justifications, with operations of dazzling profundity, taking advantage of their familiarity with the works of the great Occidental professionals of abstraction, from Plato

onward. They are all the more vulnerable to this temptation because they have, professionally so to speak, a tendency to minimize the obstacles and the objections that stubborn reality places in the way of conceptual constructs.

A very great thinker, Michel Foucault, part of a line of radically dissident thought, placed excessive hopes in the Iranian Revolution. The great gaps in his knowledge of Islamic history enabled him to transfigure the events in Iran, to accept for the most part the semitheoretical suggestions of his Iranian friends, and to extrapolate from this by imagining an end of history that would make up for disappointments in Europe and elsewhere.

Observing in 1978 the "immense pressure from the people" that was exploding, justly doubting the explanations and prognostications of the secular and liberal Iranian "politicians" for whom Khomeini represented a mere epiphenomenon that the anticipated fall of the shah would allow to be pushed aside, Foucault went to make contact with Iran itself, going to Tehran and Qom in the days immediately following the great upheavals. Avoiding the "professional politicians," he passionately and sometimes for long periods of time conducted interviews with "religious leaders, students, and intellectuals interested in the problems of Islam, and also with former guerrilla fighters who had abandoned the armed struggle in 1976 and had decided to conduct their operations in a totally different fashion, inside the traditional society" (see "What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?" app., 205).

Most of his interlocutors, chosen in this way, spoke to him not of "revolution," but of "Islamic government." What did this signify? With good will, Foucault welcomed and repeated the explanations that liberal interpreters gave him, as in the case of Ayatollah Shariatmadari (see "Iranians Dreaming," app., 205). Already, in the beginning, Foucault said, "One thing must be clear. By 'Islamic government,' nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clerics would have a role of supervision or control" (206). Apparently, Foucault had never heard of the theory already put forward by Khomeini at least thirty-four years ago, the *Velayat-i Faqih* (in Arabic *Wilayat al-Faqih*), which is the theory that the clerics are capable of governing.

It is necessary to recognize that Foucault received with some skepticism the "formulas from everywhere and nowhere" that were proposed to him concerning the deep meaning of the term "Islamic government": respect for the fruit of each one's labor, individual liberties, equality of the sexes, and so forth. It was explained to him that these were the ideas proposed at the outset by the Quran (a mythical representation strongly internalized and one that those oriented toward Islamism have heard a thousand times), of which the West had lost the meaning, but "Islam will know how to preserve their value and their efficacy" ("Iranians Dreaming," app., 207, 206).

Foucault felt embarrassed to speak of Islamic government as an “idea” or even an “ideal.” But the slogan of an Islamic government seemed to express a “political will” that impressed him. According to him, it concerned, on the one hand, an effort to give the traditional structures of Islamic society (as they appeared in Iran) a permanent role in political life. He was given the example of grassroots associations that had formed spontaneously under religious direction, which had taken upon themselves social initiatives, as in the reconstruction of a town destroyed by an earthquake. On the other hand, and in another way, it expressed, here under the inspiration of Ali Shariati, a movement to introduce a spiritual dimension into the political, “in order that this political life would not be, as always, the obstacle to spirituality, but rather its receptacle, its opportunity, its ferment” (“Iranians Dreaming,” app., 208, 207).¹²⁹

Undeniably, the tendencies that Foucault uncovered existed at the heart of the Iranian revolutionary movement of the period. With a return to prudence, he asked himself if this “political will” was strong enough to be able, on the one hand, to prevent the establishment of a regime of compromise—conservative, parliamentary, and partially secular, with the shah maintained—or, on the other hand, to establish itself as a permanent fixture in the political life of Iran.

Only a little time passed before a positive response was given to the French philosopher’s first question. He must have been very happy. But the course of events made an affirmative response to the second question more and more doubtful. At the very least, perhaps due to the deep-rootedness of his sentiments, Foucault wanted to announce the introduction of satisfactory political and social measures toward a humanist ideal,¹³⁰ due to the workings of the “political spirituality” in question.

Multiple cases of political spirituality have existed. All came to an end very quickly. Generally, they subordinated their earthly ideals, assumed in the beginning to flow from a spiritual or ideal orientation, to the eternal laws of politics, in other words the struggle for power. This is how I tried to respond to Foucault, already more or less implicitly in the article in *Le Monde* reprinted above (“Islam Resurgent?” app., 223–38), and then in a more precise and specific manner in the article in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (“Khomeini and the ‘Primacy of the Spiritual,’” app., 241–45). Naturally, these articles made much less of an impression on Foucault than did the events in Iran, which markedly lowered his hopes. In April 1979, he decided to write to the head of the Iranian government, at that time Mehdi Bazargan. His “open letter” was published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* on Saturday, April 14 (“Open Letter,” app., 260–63).

The philosopher rightly complained of the summary trials and the hasty executions that were increasing in revolutionary Iran, which had been proclaimed the Islamic Republic on April 2, following a plebiscite-referendum. He reminded Bazargan of their conversations in Qom in September 1978. At that time, Bazargan had explained to Foucault that the drive toward an Islamic government in Iran would truly guarantee fundamental human rights.

The unfortunate Mehdi Bazargan could only agree with Michel Foucault's complaints and worries. But despite his position as head of government, he had almost no power to correct the abuses and atrocities taking place in his country.

The "political spirituality" that had inspired the revolutionary movement—covering over the more material motives for the discontent and the revolt—had at a very early stage shown that it operated by no means in the humanist sense that had been attributed to it, very naively, by Foucault and Bazargan. One can mobilize the masses with ideas. However those who guide, orient, shepherd, or block the routes taken by this mobilization are people, and can only be people. Those who in the eyes of the masses seem to best embody this idea of protest and of restoration are those who, at least in the beginning, acquire the most power. Too bad if they use it poorly; too bad if they are fools, ignoramuses, those who have lost their way, or sadists; too bad if they are Torquemadas; too bad if they are Khomeinis.

The aftermath of revolution always favors the institution of a dual power. On the one hand, institutions framing the people's daily life continue to function in the old way, or are reformed, or new ones are put in place. On the other hand, the people and the structures that led the movement continue to benefit from a charisma that remains in effect for a long time. They cannot, at least for a while, simply be cast into the shadows. Quite often even, as in the case of Iran, their influence continues for a long time. Religious charisma reveals itself to be much more effective than all types of secular charisma.¹³¹

As happens in a lot of similar situations, an intense effervescence welled up from the depths of Iranian society. Individuals and groups that formulated different interpretations of the revolution—consequently envisaging, proposing, and advocating divergent paths to prolong it—multiplied rapidly. As usual, a cleavage separated the partisans of "everything is now possible," those who demanded radical measures in the direction of the objectives proclaimed at the time of the movement's development, from those who raised as an objection the necessities imposed by economic and political reality, both internationally and nationally. As is also customary, another cleavage, not exactly along the same lines, opposed those who invoked limitations due to humanistic and/or religious morality to those who scorned the latter in

order to go all the way in their persecution, repression, and massacre of yesterday's enemy, whether due to simple feelings of hatred and vengeance, to personal interest, or to rational calculation: "Only the dead do not return," "No freedom for the enemies of freedom."

Revolutionary committees were set up throughout Iran—exactng, ordering, and repressing. But the spontaneity of the masses is never anything but a guided spontaneity. A revolt in the name of religion automatically gives special authority to clerics. No matter what the ideologues and their naive friends from the "stupid West" said, the Iranian clerics were for the most part conservative and even retrograde.

And it was above all Khomeini who supported them. The Revolutionary Council, whose composition was never officially revealed, supposedly for security reasons, was a lot more powerful than the Council of Ministers. The former convened in Qom, presided over by Khomeini. The old ayatollah, whose directives inspired this council and the primary revolutionary organizations—the Islamic Committees [*Komiteh*] and the Revolutionary Guards—was increasingly designated as the "imam." The term has many meanings and can designate, for example, the humble believer who, in advance of the others (the Arabic root expresses the idea of an anterior position) directs the gestures of the Muslim prayers several times a day. But in Shi'ite lands, one thinks irresistibly of the Prophet's descendent who exercises the right to function as the mystical leader of the community. For the Twelver branch of Shi'ism [*Ithna Ahshari*] that prevails in Iran, the twelfth of this lineage mysteriously disappeared toward the end of our ninth century. Dead or simply absent and supernaturally "occulted," he must reappear at the end of time in order to bring back, to an earth drenched in sin, the radiant period of the golden age just before the Last Judgment. The ambiguity that is maintained concerning the status of Khomeini, earlier promoted to ayatollah by his peers as a favor in order to shelter him from the shah's anger,¹³² allowed the masses to attribute to him the supernatural powers of the mythical Savior.

His public proclamations, which settled the differences among multiple spiritual authorities, were also decisive. Generally, these proclamations leaned toward severity, cruelty, and archaism. In March 1979, Bazargan succeeded in obtaining from the imam the suspension of all trials and summary executions. But this pause lasted a very short time, and the trials and executions recommenced in April on an even greater scale, after the referendum.

Women, compelled to wear the specifically Iranian-style veil (the *chador*), forced into subordination and segregation, were less and less able to renew their March demonstrations in Tehran. Khomeini, who had to some extent hidden his opinions from Western journalists before taking power, covered

the most archaic interpretations of traditional morality under the sacred cloak of Islam. It was useless to counterpose less constraining traditions to those he articulated. Even if they were his peers in the religious apparatus, his critics were increasingly silenced and pushed into retirement. It was already enough that Khomeini's need to conserve his prestige within the clergy allowed them to avoid torture and death.

The intolerant old mullah used the sacred texts. He both refrained from giving them an always-possible liberal interpretation and denounced the interpretations that had been in favor during preceding eras. Traditionally,¹³³ Christians and Jews (excluding militant Zionists) had been permitted certain rights and "protections," as second-class citizens. But supporters of the universalistic, innovating, ecumenical, and syncretic Baha'i religion, already discriminated against during the period of the shah, were now atrociously persecuted. Arguments of an anti-imperialist type were added to justify this persecution: the ties of some prosperous Baha'i businessmen with Western business and the fact that the chance operation of the vicissitudes of politics had placed the tomb of the founder, who died in 1892, on Israeli soil. These points were enough to win the support of many Western, far-left zealots.

Providentially for the imam, the ethnic minorities, which expressed autonomist claims to some degree, generally adhered to Sunnism, the other branch of Islam. This made it possible, in the name of patriotism, to create an identity between, on the one hand, upholding Persian-speaking, ethnic Iranian hegemony by force of arms, and on the other, support for the cause of "true Islam," in other words, Shi'ism.

Let us come back to the revealing open letter Michel Foucault addressed to Mehdi Bazargan, six months before the latter was definitively forced to offer the resignation of his government. It was "a knife without a blade," as Bazargan himself put it. The French philosopher refused to lose hope in the tenor of the possibilities that the Iranian politician had expressed to him the year before: "Concerning these rights, . . . Islam, in its historical profundity and in its contemporary dynamism, was capable of facing the formidable challenge that socialism had not addressed any better than capitalism, and that is the least that could be said" ("Open Letter," app., 261). Foucault added: "'Impossible,' some say today, who pretend to know a lot about Islamic societies or about the nature of all religion. I will be a lot more modest than them, not seeing in the name of what universality Muslims could be prevented from seeking their future in an Islam whose new face they will have to shape with their own hands. Concerning the expression 'Islamic government,' why cast immediate suspicion on the adjective 'Islamic'? The word 'government' suffices, in itself, to awaken vigilance" (261).

Indeed. But the “modesty” of the philosopher, so confident nonetheless of the value of his reason, is not the same as the modesty of the empirical specialist, whether historian, anthropologist, or sociologist. A philosopher should not exclude any possibility. Any factor unknown until now could have the same result as putting water on intense heat and its refusing to boil. The man or woman on the street, like the physicist, would rather rely on an experiment multiplied billions of times and on a studied analysis of the transformation of liquids into gases.

To the extent that I was myself the target of Foucault’s open letter, I will respond that if I cast suspicion on the adjective “Islamic,” it was the same thing concerning every adjective that denoted an attachment to an ideal doctrine, whether religious or secular. If the word “government” must by itself, as he precisely explained, arouse vigilance, it was even more correct on his part to say that “no adjective—whether democratic, socialist, liberal, or people’s—frees it from its obligations” (“Open Letter,” app., 261).

But if nothing allowed one to think that the adjective “Islamic” had less liberatory import than another adjective, nothing demonstrated either that it had more. Why, therefore, did Foucault not add adjectives such as “Christian,” “Buddhist,” “Jewish,” “Islamic,” and so on—in short, spiritual adjectives—to those that he was enumerating? Did he suppose that these terms referred only to a governmental structure impermeable to the usual vicissitudes of power?

A government that militantly proclaims itself Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Islamic, and so on surely extols “political spirituality,” an expression that this time Foucault is very careful not to repeat. Of course, it is Foucault who presupposes that such labels render the states to which they are applied magically capable of faithfully meeting the obligations to which the doctrine they venerate should commit them.

It is not we who, under the effect of some hidden anti-Muslim inclination, brushed aside the possibility (in reality, slight) that an Islamic government, as well as other so-called “spiritual” governments, could meet at least some of these obligations. Here, there was a slightly demagogic and accommodating wink at the Muslim states, at a time when the halo of the Algerian Revolution was marked with a sacred tint for the whole Far Left.

The philosopher’s sarcasms about his adversaries’ knowledge and their vain immodesty can only serve to mask a very clear fact. It is not necessary to have great familiarity, if not with the essence of religion (“the nature of all religion” [“Open Letter,” app., 261], according to Foucault’s very essentialist formulation), at least with the sociological facts concerning religion, with the history of religion, and even with the history of Islam, in order to understand

that all of these “political spiritualities” escape only rarely from the usual laws of political struggle.

Spurred on by his political passions, Foucault, in many ways a brilliant and penetrating thinker, yielded to the banal and vulgar conception of the spiritual that had been declared taboo by virtue of millennia of forced deference. This is because he was interested in entirely different issues and shrank from questioning the foundations of a dissident fideism. It is also for this reason, I think, that elsewhere he diluted the notion of power, undermining the concept of political power by drowning it in a constellation of other powers, of micro-powers well-distanced from the extremely effective means that political power has at its disposal.

A few months later, history settled the question. It was more and more difficult to find people who were convinced that the Iranian Revolution had overcome, or was on a path toward overcoming, the oppressive potentialities of political power, or that it was on a path toward realizing an ideal, harmonious, and humane society.

Undoubtedly, the skepticism concerning the Iranian Revolution even went too far. Khomeini will die one day (written in 1988—he died on June 3, 1989), and his unfortunate influence will at least be weakened. The struggles for power, now very visible, at the heart of the corps of mullahs and beyond, will end by bringing to the top personalities who will not risk being more irrational and barbarous than this founding figure. One day, sooner or later, the deep-seated forces of Iranian civil society will insist on seeing their aspirations taken into account to a far greater extent than is allowed by oppressive frameworks in the grip of stultified tradition. During the period when Europe began to influence Iran, these aspirations became enriched with deep humanistic demands that were forgotten during periods of resignation. They are still alive. It is in neither the Quran nor the Sunna, no matter what one may think, that Khomeini found the inspiration to organize elections and to adopt a constitution. He was conscious, despite everything, that it was necessary to have the appearance of representativeness, in order to appease popular feelings.

Even under his regime, deep-seated reality created, at limited points, powerful pressures toward the adoption of reasonable measures. Some mullahs, placed in positions of responsibility, acquired technical competence and became successful administrators. To be sure, we are a long distance from the excessive hopes of Foucault, Bazargan, and those Iranians oriented toward freedom and progress. The human catastrophes were considerable. The old ayatollah sacrificed millions of Iranians, especially the youth, in a war he did not ask for, but also refused to end. (The war with Iraq ended in July 1988.)

What can one conclude, except that history continues, no matter what ideal banners the rulers brandish?

Finally, it is necessary to say that a whole sector of world opinion did not lose hope in the virtues of the Islamic Revolution. It is a question of millions of Muslims, Sunnis, and Shi'ites, who were influenced little by the unpleasant news put forth about Islamic Iran. Who spreads this news, if not journalists, press agents, and methods of mass dissemination controlled by Westerners, the developed world, the rich and powerful, those toward whom their resentment as poor and humiliated people is directed? Why have faith in them? Why not prefer the propaganda that comes from Tehran? Why not believe that the victims for whom the West is crying are conspirators, yesterday's well-to-do, now furious about their dispossession, perverse and harmful beings who oppose the founding of a new world of light; in short, enemies of God?

Those who, like the author of these lines, refused for so long to believe the reports about the crimes committed in the name of the triumphant socialism in the former Tsarist Empire, in the terrible human dramas resulting from the Soviet Revolution, would exhibit bad grace if they became indignant at the incredulity of the Muslim masses before all the spots that one asks them to see on the radiant sun of their hope.

Michel Foucault is not contemptible for not having wanted to create despair in the Muslim world's shantytowns and starving countryside, for not having wanted to disillusion them, or for that matter, to make them lose hope in the worldwide importance of their hopes. His immense philosophical talent contributed to this. As for me, I have always believed that more lucidity can be found in singers than in philosophers. I would rather find a conclusion in two lines of the good Communard Eugène Pottier, impregnated moreover with a blind confidence in the capacity of so-called spontaneous mass movements to translate their ideas into reality:

It is not from a supreme Savior,
Nor God, nor Caesar, nor Tribune.¹³⁴

Millions of men and women enamored of justice have sung these lines and yielded to the unjustified confidence that the words expressed; this was truly the root of the problem. I see many who are beginning to understand that when the mullah, even if imbued with lofty, divine thoughts, enters the political process, he is never but a particular case of the Tribune.¹³⁵