Foucault’s writings on the Islamic revolution in Iran have not received the critical attention they deserve. Published in Italian and French periodicals between the autumn of 1978 and the spring of 1979, they may be seen as exercises in contemporary history or, as Foucault himself called it, journalism of ideas; as such, they form an interesting complement to his other forays into cultural history, which deal with temporally more remote, but specifically European events and institutions. By and large, however, these articles have been either passed over in a slightly embarrassed silence, or taken as proof that Foucault’s enthusiasm for oppositional movements led him to uncritically applaud dictatorial regimes. Both attitudes, I believe, are mistaken: I hope to show that these journalistic writings indeed have a rather problematic status within Foucault’s work as a whole, but not for any such obvious reasons. I make no apologies for trying, in a perhaps rather un-Foucauldian manner, to locate them in his œuvre. Further, not being a specialist on either Foucault or the Iranian revolution, I hope to avoid the two opposing risks of burying difficulties under apologetic exegesis and of merely pointing out alleged ‘factual errors’ at the expense of more interesting theoretical questions.

A Background of Revolutionary Events

Although the emphasis here is on Foucault’s views on the Iranian revolution rather than the revolution itself, a brief recapitulation of events until early 1979 may serve as background information. Shah Reza Pahlavi’s regime had never gained a broad base in Iranian society, but had acquired a measure of legitimacy in the decennia following the CIA-backed coup that had brought him to power in 1953. By the mid-1970s, however, protests against the repressive nature of the regime and the widespread corruption started to increase dramatically. The shah reacted by simultaneously intensifying political repression and introducing half-hearted reform measures -- a combination which only exacerbated tensions.

At first, demonstrations calling for reforms were led by secularized and largely left-wing urban intellectuals; but in January 1978, a demonstration by seminary students in Qom against a government-sponsored newspaper article criticizing ayatollah Khomeini led to a confrontation with security forces that left several demonstrators dead. This triggered the Shiite Iranian clergy, which until then had remained relatively quiet, into action, and most of the subsequent protests against the shah were centered around mosques and religious gatherings. The clergy, from the highest religious scholars (‘ulam™) to the humblest village mullahs, contributed not only a highly effective mobilizing force, but also an extensive organizational network, to the protests.

On September 8, or ‘Black Friday’ as it came to be called, a massive demonstration on Jaleh Square in Tehran was violently crushed, and between 2,000 and 4,000 demonstrators were killed. This massacre seriously reduced the chances for reconciliation, and henceforth the popular rallying call was for the shah’s departure, rather than for reforms. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, his physical absence, Khomeini was a major source of these more radical demands: he had been exiled from Iran in 1963, and had resettled in the Shiite holy city of Najaf in Iraq, from where he could afford to be more critical of, and less compromising towards, the shah than other opposition leaders. Another source of inspiration for the revolution was Ali Shariati, a Maoist-inspired (though anti-Communist) Shiite pamphleteer who had died in 1977.

In December, the shah declared himself ready to negotiate directly with the opposition, but by then his position had already become untenable: on January 16,
1979, he left Iran, never to return. A provisional government led by Shahpour Bakhtiar tried to introduce quick reforms, but it was widely seen as too closely associated with the shah for it to have any legitimacy. Upon his arrival in Tehran on February 1, Khomeini appointed a new government, headed by the moderate opposition leader Mehdi Bazargan, and Bakhtiar’s government was subsequently ousted in a three-day uprising from February 10 through 12. Among the groups that had headed the revolution, a fierce competition for supremacy now developed. Moreover, in the total anarchy following the collapse of the Bakhtiar government, armed komitehs or revolutionary committees had formed all over Iran, a powerful but uncontrollable, erratic and often violent new force. Khomeini managed to impose a measure of central control on these komitehs, increasing his own power base in the process. He did so not by trying to curb the revolutionary fervor, but by channeling it to some extent with the installation of revolutionary courts, most of which were quick to mete out capital punishment, thus satisfying the popular desire for vengeance. The courts violence and lack of adequate standards quickly led to protests both in Iran and abroad, but Khomeini stood solidly behind them (Bakhash, Reign 59-63). On the whole, however, even as powerful an individual as Khomeini himself was led by events as much as he led them, and his emerging as the victor in the power struggle, let alone the eventual political shape post-revolutionary Iran was to take, was by no means a foregone conclusion (ibid. 6).

Foucault in Iran

Foucault had long been active on behalf of Iranian dissidents and political prisoners, and -- like many others -- undoubtedly saw in the popular protests a chance for a change of things for the better, and perhaps even for the ousting of a repressive and unpopular, but apparently solid, regime. Taking up an invitation from the Italian daily Corriere della Sera, he set out to write a series of articles on the Iranian protests, based on on-the-spot observations.

He meticulously prepared his Iranian journeys. He received updates on developments and addresses for contacts from Ahmad Salamatian, a left-of-center, secularized Iranian intellectual who was to become deputy minister of Foreign Affairs in Bani-Sadr’s short-lived post-revolutionary government. Further, he read Paul Vieille’s sociological studies on Iran, and Henry Corbin’s work on Iranian Islamic philosophy and spiritual life (cf. Corbin, Islam Iranien). Between the 16th and the 24th of September, 1978, one week after ‘Black Friday’, Foucault paid his first visit to Iran. As it was difficult to get in contact with the religious opposition, Foucault concentrated his inquiries on members of the secular opposition and the military. On September 20, however, he had a meeting in Qom with the moderate ayatollah Shariatmadari, who opposed the direct participation of the ulam, the higher shi’ite clergy, in government. Below, it will appear how Shariatmadari influenced Foucault’s writings about the revolution.

In October, after his return to France, he had discussions with the future president of Iran, Abol-Hasan Bani Sadr, at that time still in exile; on one occasion, he and a group of journalists also met Khomeini, who had just arrived in France on October 3, after having been expelled from Najaf by the Iraqi government. It is unknown what was said at this meeting, but at this time, Khomeini was still intentionally vague towards his European interlocutors on precisely what he meant by his call for an Islamic republic (Bakhash, Reign 48). In this period, Foucault published several articles in the Corriere della Sera, and one in the Nouvel Observateur.

From the 9th to the 15th of November, Foucault was in Iran again; this time, he talked with members of the urban middle class, as well as with oil laborers in Abadan. The same month, a second series of articles appeared, but apart from an interview with Pierre Blanchet and Claire Brière (apparently held in late 1978 or early 1979), he
remained silent about subsequent developments. He did not pay any further visits to Iran either, even though he maintained interest: thus, he went to Paris airport to see Khomeini’s departure on February 1, 1979. Possibly, this silence is due to the many negative, if not hostile, reactions that his articles drew almost from the start; in early April 1979, Foucault was even assaulted in the street, according to some observers because of his Iranian writings.4 Only in April and May 1979 did he return to the Iranian revolution in writing, with an open letter to the new prime minister Mehdi Bazargan and with two articles of a more general nature (DE III: 780-7, 790-4), which indeed suggest that he had been badly shaken by his Iranian experiences, and by the many hostile reactions to his writings in the French press. I will return to the significance of this silence below.

Journalism, Contemporary History, or Philosophy?

It should be kept in mind that Foucault’s writings on the Iranian revolution are mostly of a journalistic character, and do not directly relate to his philosophical and historical work. Nevertheless, there are some clear, if rather implicit, links to his broader theoretical concerns. First, for Foucault, both journalism and philosophy investigate the nature of the present, and in particular the question of who we are at the present moment (DE III: 783). He traces this convergence of interests back to Kant, whose answer to the question What is Enlightenment? (1784) introduced an entirely new type of question, viz., that of the present as a philosophical event, and thus in a sense defines modern philosophy as a whole (DE IV: 562, 680). Enlightenment, as captured in Kants famous slogan sapere aude, dare to know!, or even modernity as a whole, is also characterized by the public use of reason, and by a certain type of political rationality that is free of the religious. Significantly, Foucault proceeds to link Enlightenment and revolution: Kant saw in the French revolution, regardless of whether it would succeed, and of whether it would turn out violent and murderous, a sign of mankind’s unmistakable progress towards further emancipation and self-determination (Der Streit der Fakultaten, ch. II.6), and as such, Foucault suggests, the revolution is precisely what completes and continues the very process of Aufklärung (DE IV: 685).5 A journalistic inquiry into a revolutionary event, especially one which so centrally involves the public and political use of religion as the uprising in Iran, thus implies a philosophical commentary on modernity itself.

Foucault tries to reach a journalistic understanding of the present by means of what he called reportages des idées. The present world, he argues, is replete with novel ideas, especially among suppressed or hitherto ignored groups of people:

Some say that the great ideologies are in the course of dying. The contemporary world, however, is burgeoning with ideas […]. One has to be present at the birth of ideas and at the explosion of their force; not in the books that pronounce them, but in the events in which they manifest their force, and in the struggles people wage for or against ideas. (DE III: 706-7)

This emphasis on the historical force of ideas is directed as much against the first forebodings of postmodernist claims concerning the end of grand ideologies as against the Marxist dogma that ideology is secondary to economic factors. As a reporter of ideas in Iran, Foucault himself would like to grasp what is in the course of happening, even though he considers himself a neophyte in journalism (DE III: 714; emph. in original).

A second major link is formed by the theme of power and resistance. Foucault was obviously fascinated — and disturbed — by the Iranian populations readiness to risk imprisonment, torture, and even death, and tried to discover precisely what gave them this apparently totally unified, and heroic, will. In general, revolt may be seen as an extreme case of resistance against domination, and would thus seem a convenient illustration of Foucault’s criticism of a juridical view of power with its domination— and
state-oriented perspective -- a criticism formulated in particular in the first volume of
Histoire de la sexualité (Volonté 107-35).

Third, Foucault's writings on Iran may be seen as a tentative application of his
more theoretical ideas to a contemporary event in a non-Western society, whereas his
earlier studies had limited themselves to Western European, and especially French,
historical events and institutions. Some, e.g. Said (Foucault 9), have accused Foucault
of an implicit eurocentrism; it is indeed an open question whether the conceptual tools
developed in his earlier works can be applied to rather different historical and cultural
contexts.

Foucault's first articles in the Corriere della Sera show few obvious traces of
such broader concerns, as they are no more than preliminary forays into an unknown
territory, informed by an inkling that something quite novel was taking place. They try
to assess, for example, the role of the army, and the character of the protests against the
shah's archaic program of modernization (DE III: 680-3). The economic reforms
introduced in Iran since the 1960s had, for the most part, benefited only a small part of
Iranian society, and the increase in oil wealth in the 1970s had only helped to exacerbate
the already serious corruption and political repression. In other words, Foucault's
critique of the shah's Western-inspired modernization program as archaic is less a
relativistic rejection of the idea of modernity in general than a criticism of one specific
program to reach it.

Foucault also notes the apparent absence of any clear social or economical basis
for the mass protests, in which both urban workers and bazaar merchants participated
(DE III: 702), implying, of course, that events in Iran do not allow for a Marxist
explanation. At first sight, this observation seems correct, as the Iranian economy had
shown a steady growth throughout the 1970s, especially after the drastic increase in oil
prices in 1974. The sudden wealth, however, had led the Pahlavi regime to engage in a
reckless spending spree, which caused a serious overheating of the economy. The
government then cut down on investment and stopped recruiting for the civil services
sector, which in turn led to a decrease in business opportunities, mass unemployment
and sudden impoverishment among the middle and lower classes (cf. Hiro, Iran 60-3;
Bakhash, Reign 12-3). In other words, there was a clear economic base for the protests:
for large parts of the population, the supposedly affluent 1970s had only brought new
hardships and frustrated expectations -- a familiar precondition for the emergence of
revolutionary movements.

Foucault gradually shifts his attention towards the peculiar character of Iranian
Islam, notably its potential for resistance against state power. At the time, the very
idea that Islam, in whatever variety, could be revolutionary, rather than inherently
reactionary, seemed anathema; but Foucault correctly saw the decisive importance of
political Islam in the protests, both as an ideology for mass mobilization and as
providing an institutional and organizational base for the opposition to the Pahlavi
regime. This correct assessment is paired, however, with a number of seriously flawed
or oversimplified remarks on shiism in general. Thus, Foucault believes that the shiite
clergy knows no hierarchy; that shiite religious authority is given by the people; and
consequently, that clerics can ill afford to ignore popular angers and aspirations (DE III:
687, 691). In fact, the shiite ulam have over the last centuries shaped themselves into
a highly organized and hierarchic institution that is to an important extent autonomous
from both the state and society. Foucault at once corrects himself by adding that the
shiite clerics are by no means revolutionary, but that the shiite religion itself is the
form taken by political struggle, especially when it involves mass mobilization. These
remarks still sidestep a long history and risk attributing causal power to shiite ideology
itself, but perhaps one cannot expect detailed historical analyses from a newspaper
reportage.
Foucault also gropes at length for an explanation for the fearlessness and perfectly unified collective will (DE III: 715) of the unarmed demonstrators, which he thinks characterizes not a political movement but a revolt against the existing political order of the whole world: the most modern form of revolt -- and the maddest (DE III: 716). Aply, then, it is not a politician, but the almost mythical personality of Khomeini who is able to guide the protests and maintain their momentum. Foucault is well aware of the potential violence of this confrontation: the image [of the unarmed saint versus the king in arms] has its own captivating force, but it masks a reality in which millions of dead come to inscribe their signature (DE III: 689-90); he adds (692) that he finds the definitions of Islamic government which he has heard hardly reassuring.

Here, too, Foucault’s insight is at odds with the then widespread opinion that Khomeini was merely a figurehead with no power or program of his own. He explains the intensity of the link between the ayatollah and the people from three facts: Khomeini’s not being there, his not saying anything (other than no to every attempt at compromise), and his not being a politician. The last point even led Foucault to state: there won’t be a party of Khomeinis, there won’t be a Khomeini government (DE III: 716). Predictions are always risky, and this one has proved wrong on both counts: on February 5, 1979, Khomeini appointed Bazargan to form a new government, and two weeks later, the strongly pro-Khomeini Islamic Republican Party was formed. Although Khomeini formally stayed outside these new political structures, they unmistakably strengthened his power base, and Foucault’s remark suggests a serious underestimation of his political ambitions. Again, however, he was by no means alone in this. Before 1978, nobody outside a small circle of specialists knew of the political ideas among the Iranian shiite ulam, let alone about the existence and political doctrines of Khomeini, and this circle itself was equally surprised at the course and speed of events in 1978 and 1979. Even such a well-informed observer of Iranian society as Fred Halliday (Dictatorship 299), writing on the eve of the revolution, considered it unlikely that the Iranian clergy was to play a major role if the shah’s regime should be overthrown.

Perhaps the main shortcoming of these reportages, apart from such forgivable errors, is that they overemphasize the religious dimension of the demonstrations, at the expense of their unmistakably nationalist element: a clear demand for national sovereignty was expressed in the protest against the American presence and against alleged Zionist conspiracies to undermine the nation. The sweeping characterizations of the social role of shiite Islam and of Khomeinis role in the protests are perhaps inevitable for newspaper articles, but at times come dangerously close to idealist explanations.

Uncritical support for Khomeini?

Opposition to Foucault’s alleged enthusiasm for the prospect of Islamic government and the person of Khomeini began to be voiced upon publication of the first Nouvel Observateur article. They intensified after Khomeinis arrival in February 1979 had triggered off a violent power struggle, accompanied by a wave of summary executions. Thus, in Le Matin (March 24, 1979), Claudie and Jacques Broyelle accused Foucault of blindly supporting Khomeini, and called on him to acknowledge his errors.6 More recently, Bernard-Henry Levy (Aventures 482-3) has written that Foucaults judgment on Iran was blinded by his hope for a pure revolution, a hope he allegedly shared with many French intellectuals. He construes Foucaults remarks on Khomeinis mystical dimension and mysterious link with the people as signs of a personal admiration. He believes Foucaults main error, a practically obligatory stage in this spiritual journey, is an initially boundless and uncritical enthusiasm, which
founders on the violence of actual events and leads to an eventual disenchantment with ideals.

Such criticisms, often made with the benefit of hindsight, are not only off the mark but also unfair. Most of them emphasize the violent turn of events from February 1979 onwards, when Foucault had ceased publishing his commentaries; but even in his earlier journalistic articles, Foucault nowhere speaks of the revolt in terms of progress or liberation. He reacted fiercely against these accusations, and forcefully rejected the antagonistic attitude they presupposed:

The problem of Islam as a political force is an essential problem for our era and for the years to come. The first condition for addressing it with a minimum of intelligence is not to start by confronting it with hatred (DE III: 708)

Indeed, Foucault has to be credited for perceiving the historical importance of this revolution at an early stage, and for repeatedly visiting Iran in order to see for himself what was happening. He was clearly fascinated, and troubled, by this unprecedented assertion of a unified popular will. He may have underestimated Khomeini's political role, but none of his published writings express anything remotely like a blind admiration for Khomeini or an uncritical enthusiasm for the prospect of Islamic government.

More interesting, if hardly less polemical, criticisms have been voiced by non-Western intellectuals. Thus, Mohammed Arkoun, in an interview with Hashim Saleh (Fikr), argues that philosophers like Foucault and Derrida, despite their critique of eurocentrism, Ôremain within the walls of the European tradition of thoughtÕ. In their archaeology of different systems of knowledge, religion -- and in particular Islam -- is consistently ignored, despite the presence of millions of Islamic immigrants in Europe. Moreover, when they do write about Islam, as Foucault did on the Islamic revolution, they say nothing but stupidities (hamqat). Foucault, Arkoun concludes, did not understand anything of what was happening in Iran, and would have done better not to have said anything about it at all.7 On a more moderate note, Darius Rejali argues in his Torture and Modernity (14-16) that Foucault cannot properly account for the persistence of torture in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran, in a state that (at least under the Pahlavi regime) Ôslavishly emulated the Western regime of truthÕ, where the need for torture has supposedly been replaced by more disciplinary forms of punishing, such as imprisonment. Such criticisms have considerably more force, as they point to the fundamental question of whether and how Foucault's ideas, which derive from the study of specifically European events and institutions, can be extended to a non-European domain at all. I hope to show, however, that they do not apply to all of Foucault's Iranian writings to the same extent.

**Political Spirituality and its Ancestors**

Foucault's first article for a French audience, , quoi rvent les Iraniens? (DE III: 688-94), is by no means a mere summary of the Italian reportages. It delves much more into the history of Iran and of shiite Islam. And it is here that things become problematic. To begin with, his explanation of the call for Islamic government is obviously colored by the restricted range of his interlocutors:

What do you want? During the whole of my stay in Iran, I never once heard the word revolution. But four times out of five, I got the answer Islamic government [...]. One thing should be clear: by [this], no one in Iran means a political order in which the clergy would play a role of ruler or provider of cadre (DE III: 690).

This seriously underestimates the character and background of the contemporary debate; most importantly, Foucault was apparently unaware of Khomeinis concept of velvat-e faqh (guardianship of the jurist, i.e., government by the shiite clergy), as Rodinson (Primaut 307) notes. In his earlier writings, Khomeini had not questioned
the legitimacy of the Pahlavi monarchy as such, and merely called for the clergy to play a greater role in political affairs; in the 1960s, he had developed far more radical ideas against the background of the rising Marxist-inspired student activism. But even among the main clerics involved in the revolution, there was no consensus on the nature of an eventual Islamic government. Bani-Sadr, for example, had come close to identifying the shiite idea of the imam as the only legitimate ruler with a European idea of popular sovereignty, by developing a concept of tamm-e immat, or generalized imamate (cf. Bakhash, Reign 93-5). For him, each member of the community could become a jurist or even an imam through piety and self-discipline; consequently, he saw no need for a separate class of religiously trained jurists. The only religious authority whom Foucault met, Ayatollah Shariatmadari (DE III: 691), consistently opposed any role for the clergy in worldly leadership.

Foucault’s most controversial remark, however, was his suggestion that those participating in the demonstrations against the shah might be trying to introduce, or reintroduce, a spiritual dimension into political life (DE III: 693-4), and that this might be the ultimate motivation for their heroic and self-sacrificing behavior:

At the dawn of history, Persia has invented the State and rendered its services to Islam [...]. But of this same Islam, it has derived a religion that has given its people indefinite resources for resisting State power. Should one see in this desire for an Islamic Government a reconciliation, a contradiction, or the threshold of a novelty? [...] What sense, for the people, in seeking at the price of their very lives this thing, the possibility of which we have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crises of Christianity: a political spirituality. I can already hear some Frenchmen laughing, but I know they are wrong (DE III: 694)

Although the suggestion that all participants were seeking the same spirituality may seem rather implausible, the desire for Islamic government as an end of the Pahlavi regimes sellout to the United States and other foreign powers was undeniably a major mobilizing force. One may wonder to what extent this desire was nationalist or populist, rather than religious, in character, but at least Foucault rightly asks whether this Islamic government might in fact be something radically new, instead of assuming -- as many would be tempted to do -- that it simply amounts to a step back in time.8

In the context of Foucault’s journalistic work, the notion of political spirituality should probably not be given too much philosophical weight. Elsewhere, however, it is explicitly linked to his other philosophical concerns. First and foremost, however, it obviously reflects his intense attempts to come to terms with the apparently novel logic of the early revolutionary events; as seen, he implicitly and explicitly denies the possibility of understanding the revolt in the familiar categories of class struggle and the like.

It seems, however, that Foucault’s emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of the uprising derives less from what he observed on the ground than from what he had been reading in preparation. One major source for the notion of political spirituality, acknowledged as such by Foucault, is Ali Shariati (DE III: 693; cf. Rodinson, Primaut 308).9 In his pamphlets, Shariati had developed a view of shiite Islam as the religion of the oppressed, giving the potential shiite opposition to any form of worldly government a more revolutionary character. Shariati, active in the 1960s and early 1970s, had been inspired by champions of Third-World liberation like Mao, Castro, and Fanon, but at the same time he emphasized shiite Islamic spirituality as an antidote to Marxist-inspired materialism (e.g. Shariati, Marxism; cf. Abrahamian, Khomeinism, ch. 1).

Another, and probably more important, influence is Henry Corbin. According to his editors (DE III: 662), Foucault preparatory reading on Iran included Corbins important works on Islamic -- in particular shiite -- philosophy and spirituality (e.g.
Corbin, Histoire: Islam Iranien). Corbin, more than any Westerner, had devoted his academic life to the publication and translation of manuscripts from the philosophical traditions of Islamic Iran; his representation of Islamic thought is cast in a distinctly Heideggerian mould, but is simultaneously guided by the essentialist idea that the real Islamic spirituality is to be found in the more esoteric and Gnostic branches of Shiism in Iran.10 Thus, he concludes his history of Islamic philosophy with an appeal to Iranian Muslims to preserve their traditional spiritual culture against the Western impact (Histoire 497ff.).

Corbin’s hermeneutics of Islamic texts stresses the distinction between the superficial exoteric (zahir) meaning and the true, inner (batin) meaning. In an interview on the Islamic revolt (DE III: ch. 259), Foucault also makes much of this distinction, when he describes the Islamic Revolution as both an inner and outer experience, as both a timeless and a historical drama (DE III: 746); significantly, he also links it to his own theoretical notions when he tries to capture what he calls perhaps the soul of the uprising:

Religion for them was like the promise and guarantee of something that would radically change their subjectivity. Shiism is precisely a form of Islam that, with its teaching and esoteric content, distinguishes between what is merely external and what is the profound spiritual life (DE: 749)

and elsewhere, as an explanation of Iranian attitudes to propaganda:

They don’t have the same regime of truth as ours, which, it has to be said, is very special, even if it has become almost universal [...]. In Iran it is largely modeled on a religion that has an exoteric form and an esoteric content. That is to say, everything that is said under the explicit form of the law also refers to another meaning (DE III: 753-4).

I will return to Foucault’s appeal to regimes of truth below. His other writings from this period suggest that the formation of, and changes in, subjectivity are processes in which various kinds of power relation are crucial. That political spirituality might also be seen as a form of resistance against a prevailing power with its concomitant form of political rationality is suggested by a passage from the Tanner lectures which Foucault presented at Stanford in October 1979:

Those who resist or rebel against a form of power cannot merely be content to denounce violence or criticize an institution. Nor is it enough to cast the blame on reason in general. What has to be questioned is the form of rationality at stake (DE IV: 161).

For a European audience, then, the concept of political spirituality also suggests an alternative to a kind of political rationality that has been predominant since the Enlightenment. Such suggestions are certainly interesting and worth exploring further, but it should be noted that Foucault’s case rests in part on a rather biased view of what Shiism amounts to in doctrinal terms. His Corbin-inspired claims notwithstanding, the exoteric-esoteric opposition is not an essential part of Shiite Islam, not even in its Iranian varieties. In Shiite Iran, esoteric currents have always remained a minority phenomenon, and most clerics have traditionally been suspicious of such Gnostic and esoteric doctrines that might undermine the shar’ā (Islamic law) as the basis of social order.11

Foucault not only presents a minority view as the real Shiite faith, he also speaks consistently of Shiism tout court, as if it were a monolithic and historically stable set of doctrines, or even a timeless drama which has formed a base for opposition to state power since the dawn of history.12 In fact, Islamic spirituality in Iran has undergone radical transformations over the centuries, both among the population at large and among the Shiite clergy.13 Ever since the mysterious disappearance of the twelfth imām in 873 CE, the Shiite community had faced the
problem of legitimate spiritual and worldly authority. Because just rule would only be established at the end of times, when the Hidden Imm would reappear, all worldly government was in a sense illegitimate by definition; but most shiite scholars recommended acquiescing in this cosmic injustice as part of the shiites eschatological fate. This ambivalent attitude towards state power became even more pronounced when law-based twelver or imami shiism became the state religion of the Safavid empire in the sixteenth century. On the whole, shiite jurists and theologians have not developed a consistent and generally accepted theory of the state and of legitimate rule. Before the 1960s, however, none of these thinkers held that monarchy was in itself illegitimate; on the contrary, many of them explicitly considered bad government better than the anarchy of revolution. The development from quietism to revolutionary Islam in this period was itself a revolutionary innovation in shiite thought.

Although Foucault would undoubtedly have rejected the idealist position that the shiite faith possesses causal historical powers of itself, he faces similar difficulties as the idealist. Thus, only by ignoring historical and other variations can he avoid the question of what, if any, is the regime of truth shared by both law-oriented and more mystically inclined Persian thinkers, not to mention the population at large. He also leaves it unclear whether the allegedly sought-for change in subjectivity would amount to a return to a truth regime predating the shahs Western-inspired modernization project, or leave the existing truth regime intact. His ignorance of historical developments in shiism and his appeal to a presumably timeless drama or a millenarian zhbir-btin distinction, then, allow for a totally idealist, if not transcendental, reconstruction of his ideas on Iran. This opportunity was eagerly grasped by Corbins pupil Christian Jambet, who ascribes him a roundly essentialist and ahistorical view, disguised as a spiritual metahistory which seems completely at odds with all of Foucaults other writings:

Foucaults point is not the politics of a future state but the essence of an uprising, of the spiritual politics which makes it possible [...]. He sees immediately that here history is the expression of a metahistory, or again of a hiero-history, and that the temporalisation of time is suspended in favor of messianic events, whose place is not the world of phenomena understood by science (Subject 234).

Here, Foucaults interest in the Iranian revolution as an unprecedented historical event has to make room for an inquiry into the supposed spiritual or transcendental essence of any uprising. The convergences that Jambet perceives between Corbins meta-historical phenomenology and the archaeology of knowledge seem less the result of any natural affinity than traces of Corbins direct influence on Foucaults Iranian writings. But are the essentialist ideas of shiism as a force irreducibly opposed to state power, and of a specifically Iranian-Islamic regime of truth, both heavily dependent on Corbins work, really so at odds with Foucaults more general notions, such as episteme and regime of truth? In a 1977 interview, Foucault suggests that each society has its regime of truth [...]; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true (P/K 131/ DE III: 158), and that the contemporary Western European regime of truth (which is centered on a form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it) is by and large the same regime operating in the socialist countries, but probably different from that in China (P/K 133). The concept of regime of truth, then, seems to play much the same structural role that such notions as culture or world view play in more idealistically inclined authors: it allows for a sweeping characterization of an entire historical period or geographical region. As such, it faces the risk of reducing singular historical events to static and essentialist categories, a risk implicit in any attempt at historical classification or periodization. In short, political spirituality may be quite suggestive as a journalistic notion, but as a
philosophical concept it is deeply problematic, indeed indicative of more general problems that Foucault faces.

**Power and Power Struggle**

The biggest surprises, however, lie in store for those who turn to Foucault's Iranian articles with his analytic of power in mind. After all, the relevance of the Islamic revolution to the concerns of *Surveiller et punir* and the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité* is obvious. In the latter work, Foucault argues at length against the prevailing juridical view that tends to see power as a kind of institution, and instead proposes to represent power relations as at the same time intentional and non-subjective, as no individual has full control over the directedness of power relations (Volonté 124). The juridical view from above sees power merely as domination, or as a purely negative force, thus ignoring its productive capacities: the representation of power has remained haunted by monarchy. In political thought, the king's head has not yet been cut (ibid. 117). As an alternative, Foucault proposes to take the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. A systematic awareness that power inevitably calls up resistance, i.e., that resistance is internal to power relations, opens up the way for an analysis of power relations through the antagonism of strategies (Dreyfus & Rabinow 211/ DE IV: 225). Admittedly, Foucault does not intend his analytic of power as a general theory, but rather as a tool that can open insights into a certain form of knowledge about sex (Volonté 109, 128); yet, it might equally provide new insights into power relations in rather different spheres.

The implications of this shift from a juridical to a strategical view of power do not seem to be sufficiently appreciated by all of Foucault's students. Seen from this novel perspective on power, however, the Iranian revolution, and in particular the chaotic and violent power struggle that erupted when the shah had left and the old institutions of power and government, including the army and the police forces, had collapsed (and, so to speak, the king's head had actually been chopped off), provided an ideal test case for an analytic of power. An analysis of the institutional bases and different strategies of the various actors involved would have proven a worthwhile, if by no means easy, task; in particular the ways in which Khomeini managed to accumulate political power for himself, by refusing to compromise and by encouraging and at the same time channeling popular action, would have formed an interesting challenge to Foucault's view of power as an intentional relation without an (individual) subject.

But nothing of the sort happened. Instead, Foucault hardly tried to link his initial fascination with the novelty of the protests to his more theoretical interests in power and resistance, and when he did address the violence that marked the post-revolutionary power struggle, he fell back on a universalist position that takes the rights of the individual and the rule of law as a kind of moral rock bottom. This universalist ethics appears clearly in several articles published in April and May 1979. Thus, in an open letter to Mehdi Bazargan, published in mid-April (DE III: 780-2), Foucault argues that political processes against representatives of a former regime are a touchstone regarding the essential obligations of any government. His letter was addressed to precisely the wrong person, however, as Bazargan had already publicly protested against the many summary executions, and against the revolutionary trials, which he called shameful, in late March (editors note, DE III: 663; cf. Bakhash, Reign 61). More importantly, real power at this moment lay with the revolutionary committees and courts as much as with the Bazargan government.

The same theme is picked up in *Inutile de se soulever?* (Le Monde, May 11-12, 1979; DE III: 790-4), where Foucault argues that enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution is not a legitimization of (post-)revolutionary violence: the spirituality that those who were going to die appealed to has no common measure with the bloodthirsty
government of a fundamentalist clergy (DE III: 793). The ethics he defends is not relativist, but rather anti-strategic (794): it involves showing respect when a singularity rises, but being intransigent when power infringes on the universal. Foucault’s ethics is clearly universalist in its stress on the rights of the individual, that is, something much like classical human rights. Being anti-strategic, it may be opposed to power-as-strategy almost by definition, but its appeal to laws without franchise and rights without restriction (ibid.) almost suggests that such laws and rights are defined without any recourse to power. The question then arises on what philosophical basis Foucault can make such an appeal, given his earlier attempts to cast doubt on the universalist aspirations of reason since the Enlightenment; moreover, on earlier occasions, he had explicitly refused to condemn the possibly violent, dictatorial and even bloody power that the proletariat could exercise in revolutionary justice over the vanquished classes.18

This problem deserves further attention, but here, the central question is why Foucault reverted to such a classical (dare I say Enlightenment-inspired?) position. Was he really so shocked and surprised at the revolution developing into a violent competition for power? Perhaps he had ignored the political power struggle hidden behind the religious slogans because of his emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the revolt that expressed its supposedly unified popular will. Rodinson (Primault, 309f.) argues as much, with his remark that all cases of political spirituality have eventually submitted to the ‘eternal laws of politics,’ that is, the struggle for power, and adds that Foucault more generally has undermined the concept of political power with his constellation of micro-powers. Or had Foucault simply lost interest in the revolution as a political struggle for power, once the spiritual revolt against the shah’s power had been successful? This may be suggested by his early remark that the phenomenon which has so fascinated us -- the revolutionary experience itself -- will die out (DE III: 750), reflecting his view that his main interest, the unified popular will, was not the result of a political alliance or compromise, but something that stood outside politics, or temporarily transformed it.

Foucault’s silence on the complex post-revolutionary power struggle and his subsequently reverting to a universalist ethics based on immutable laws suggest a conceptual inability to move beyond the domination-resistance dichotomy implicit in the juridical view of power which he himself had so strongly criticized. Seen in this light, his ignoring of historical developments in shiite Islam, and of internal divisions along lines of political outlook, class, ethnicity or denomination between those participating in the uprising, may not be an accident after all. It points to a far more general difficulty of how to account for variation and change in regimes of truth, or epistemes, or paradigms (cf. Dreyfus & Rabinow 262; Taylor, Freedom 182). In other words, Foucault’s conceptualization of regimes of truth and political rationalities, and even his strategy-oriented analytic of power relations, may still be too static and monolithic to allow for a genuine explanation of such drastic changes as occur in revolutionary periods, and of power struggle in the absence of the effective concentration of power in government and state apparatus.

By way of conclusion

Let me return to the three links between Foucault’s Iranian writings and his broader concerns. First, Foucault’s journalistic intuition that something radically new was occurring in Iran has certainly proved correct. He managed to put aside much fashionable prejudice and ask many interesting questions, and intelligently sought for adequate answers at a time when no one quite understood as yet what was in the course of happening. Second, however, Foucault surprisingly failed to analyze the revolution in terms of power from below or his strategy-based view of power, and ultimately even reverted to a universalist ethics based on laws and rights that do not seem to allow
for compromise or discussion. Third, Foucault’s more philosophically loaded remarks on the revolution betray a strong influence of Henry Corbin’s work. His explanation of the specifics of the revolt in terms of a distinct Iranian-shiite regime of truth and of a desire for a change in subjectivity and political rationality seems less a genuine application of his conceptual tools than a relapse into the conventional text-based idealism of Oriental studies -- that is, into precisely the kind of idealist history of ideas which his earlier writings had done much to discredit.19 Foucault’s general works thus do not display the obvious eurocentrism of which he has been accused. At the same time, however, his Iranian writings point to deeper difficulties of his work concerning power relations and intellectual change. They foreshadow the remarkable shift between *Le volonté de savoir* (1976) and the last two volumes of *Histoire de la sexualité* (1984), from the microphysics of power to the self-constitution of the individual as a desiring subject, where power is no longer a central theme.20 The latter works read much like an exercise in conventional history of ideas -- albeit with an unconventional theme -- with their focus on the literate male elite of ancient Greece.

There is little point in biographical speculation as to whether Foucault’s sudden reversal on the Islamic revolution is due to his revulsion at the revolutionary violence or to his dismay at the outcry among French intellectuals. His silence on the power struggle and his subsequent reversal to a universalist ethics may not merely be expressive of his shock at the violent turn taken by events, but also reflect his more general intellectual problem of how to account for conceptual change and its relation to changes in power. Depending on one’s perspective, then, one may either see Foucault’s journalistic writings on Iran as a missed opportunity; as the conclusive proof that his conceptual tools are too static, monolithic, and idealist to allow for any practical use; or as a promise, not yet fulfilled, that a Foucauldian vision of cultural history may be extended to non-European territory. Paradoxically, however, Foucault-the-journalist showed a far greater sensitivity to the specific and novel character of the Iranian revolution as a historical event than Foucault-the-philosopher. His attempts at a journalistic understanding of the present may yet change our appreciation of modernity, with its entire political rationality inherited from the Enlightenment -- and of the protagonists of the contemporary Islamic world, who far from being ‘anti-modern’ as often thought, are searching different ways of being modern.

NOTES

1These articles are now conveniently available in vol. III of Foucault’s *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988* (abbreviated DE), which contains almost all of his scattered writings and interviews. There are minor discrepancies between the French texts as reproduced in DE III and as quoted by Eribon, presumably due to translation differences; but these do not involve any points of importance. One 1978 article from Corriere della Sera, *Taccuino persiano: Ritorno al profeta?*, dated October 22 (according to Stauth) or 28 (Eribon), is not reprinted in DE III.

2For more details, see the excellent political histories by Shaul Bakhash and Dilip Hiro; cf. Halliday, *Dictatorship* for an assessment of Iran right before the turbulent events of 1978 and 1979.

3This information is largely taken from Eribon’s ch. 19, and from the editorial introduction to Foucault’s Iranian articles (DE III: 662). Macey’s (406-11) portrait of Foucault in Iran is rather less charitable and well-informed than Eribon’s.
4Le Monde, April 4 1979; Le Matin, April 3 and 14, 1979; Nouvelles littéraires 2681 (1979): 16. Surprisingly, this incident is not mentioned in either Eribon or Macey’s biography.

5Politically, Foucault undoubtedly cherished the prospect of the shah’s government being ousted, although philosophically, he could (unlike Kant) hardly describe this revolutionary enthusiasm in teleological terms of progress and liberation.

6Unfortunately, I could not find this article; cf. Olivier & Labbé, Désir: 220n4 for its main points.

7I am indebted to Mariwan Kanie for drawing my attention to this interview.

8The implementation of Islamic government has indeed turned out to be something radically new, rather than a return to some pre-modern political order, even if it has in part been legitimized as such. It features a constitutional court, a directly elected president and a supreme leader or guide (rahbar), none of which is anticipated in earlier shiite political thought, let alone in the original community of believers headed by the prophet Mohammed (cf. Abrahamian, Khomeinism).

9Perhaps Shariati’s notion of political spirituality had reached Foucault by way of Mehdi Bazargan, when the latter two met in Qom in September 1978 (cf. DE III: 781).

10For more on Corbin and his use of Heideggerian hermeneutics in interpreting mystically inclined Islamic philosophy, see my From Freiburg to Isfahan: Heidegger and the Wisdom of the East.

11Instead of appealing to the elitist zhir-btin distinction, Foucault might as well have appealed to the much more widespread politeness principle of ta’rof, the Iranian equivalent of comme il faut, which, for example, requires one to invite visitors to stay for dinner for the sake of politeness, even if one has no real intention of actually hosting them.

12Stauth (15-6, 34) already noted that the concept of political spirituality implies a relapse to an Orientalist view of religion as in itself determinative of social action.

13I cannot trace these developments in detail here; see Mottahedeh, Mantle, and Abrahamian, Khomeinism, ch. 1, for the main points raised.

14Significantly, he fails throughout the Brire & Blanchot interview to address the questions posed to him regarding ethnic and other cleavages among the protest movement.

15For more detailed discussion of Foucault’s views on power, see especially Dreyfus & Rabinow, ch. 6, 9; Taylor, Freedom, esp. III; and Cohen & Arato, Civil Society, pt. II, ch. 6.

16Thus, Taylor (168) seems to mistake Foucault’s claim that power comes from below for the idea that one should study power in micro-contexts of local dominators and dominated, rather than in macro-contexts like state or class; in fact, Foucault rejects the domination model at both the micro- and macro-level. Olivier & Labbé (Désir: 234) likewise attribute to Foucault a state- and domination-oriented view, according to which revolt constitutes a limit or obstacle, but not an end, to power.

17In another article, Pour un morale de l’inconfort (DE III: 783-7), Foucault addresses the difficulty of having to revise one’s certainties without giving up one’s convictions. Years of experience, he writes, lead us not to trust any revolution, even if one can understand every revolt. As Eribon notes, this sounds very much like an acknowledgment that his journalistic adventures in Iran had been a failure.

18Witness, for example, the discussion on popular justice as opposed to bourgeois justice, and the famous television debate with Noam Chomsky (DE II: ch. 108, 132).
The most famous example of a Foucault-inspired critique of the philological bias and essentialism of much conventional Orientalist scholarship is, of course, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

Edward Said (Foucault 8-9) attributes this shift to Foucault’s disenchantment with the public sphere, to his pursuit of different kinds of pleasures, and to his unusual experience of excess that was the Iranian revolution: it was as if for the first time Foucault's theories of impersonal, authorless activity had been visibly realized and he recoiled with understandable disillusion.