

HAMARTIA: FOUCAULT AND IRAN 1978–1979

(1: INTRODUCTION AND TEXTS)

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10.4102/hts.v65i1.124**This article is available at:**<http://www.hts.org.za>**Note:**Dr Johann Beukes (D Litt
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University of Pretoria.**ABSTRACT**

In 1978 Michel Foucault went to Iran as a distinguished intellectual but novice political journalist, controversially reporting on the unfolding revolution, undeniably compromising and wounding his reputation in the European intellectual community. Given the revolution's bloody aftermath and its violent theocratic development, is Foucault's Iranian expedition simply to be understood as *hamartia*, a critical error in judgement, with disastrous consequences for his legacy? What exactly did Foucault hope to achieve in Iran in 1978 to 1979, explicitly supporting the cause of the revolting masses and effectively isolating himself from the European intellectual community and the Western liberal tradition? This series of two articles attempts to shed light on these questions by, in the first article, 1) introducing and contextualising the philosophical issues and 2) discussing the relevant texts; then, in the second article, 3) elaborating on three explicit contributions (Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson; Ian Almond; and Danny Postel) that recently have been made on this neglected issue in Foucault scholarship and 4) eventually indicating the possible philosophical significance of Foucault's peculiar mixture of naïveté and perceptivity – indeed his peculiar *hamartia* – regarding the events in Iran. Presenting Foucault as a 'self-conscious Greek in Persia', the argument in both articles is that Foucault's 'present-historical' writings on the Iran revolution were closely related to his general theoretical writings on the discourses of power and his cynical perspectives on the inherent risks of modernity. Foucault's journalistic writings on Iran in 1978 to 1979 are therefore to be appreciated as essentially philosophical contributions to his extensive modern-critical *œuvre*. Foucault's perspectives on power, revolt, Otherness, 'political spirituality' and his 'ethics of Self-discomfort' may prove to be as significant for an understanding of our world today as the author considers them to have been during the events of September 1978 to April 1979, with Tehran's self-esteem still radiating in the desert skies 30 years later.

INTRODUCTION: ἡμάρτια

ἡμάρτια, the classic Aristotelian notion of 'a tragic error in judgement with disastrous consequences', has in this sector of Foucault reception arrived at the crossroads. Should the notions of a critical error in political and ethical judgement, of a philosophical folly, of an intellectual vanity, have the last word on Michel Foucault's highly controversial journalistic expedition to Iran 30 years ago? For some Foucault scholars that is the case, and yet for others it simply is not. Some argue that Foucault in Iran in 1978 was a self-displaced French philosopher, in the wrong place at the wrong time, saying what should not have been said; others argue that he was right where he should have been during the last quarter of 1978, reading and writing against the grain, saying against mandarin conventions what Western philosophers since Plato have always been saying: Things are not what they seem.

I am using this complex Greek concept, ἡμάρτια, in a tactical way, in a 'Persian' context, here. *Hamartia* (sometimes the word is presented in classical literature as *harmartia*) is a word famously used in Aristotle's *Poetics*, often translated as a 'grave mistake' or a 'serious error in judgement'. In Greek, the word ἡμάρτια is rooted in the notion of missing the mark (*hamartanein*) and covers a broad semantic spectrum that includes accidents and mistakes with serious consequences – in some of the theologies in the second Testament of the Christian Bible, even *sin*. In Greek tragedy the concept of ἡμάρτια as an error in judgement or unwitting mistake is applied to the actions of the protagonist and is central to the plot of the tragedy. In particular, the protagonist may attempt to achieve a certain objective; by making an error in judgement, however, the protagonist instead achieves the opposite, with disastrous consequences. Aristotle (*Poetics* 1453a; see *Poetics* 6.24) famously cites the example of Sophocles' Oedipus, who acted with consistent discipline to prevent the fulfilment of the Oracle's prediction that he would kill his father and have sex with his mother, but by his actions he instead caused those very things to happen.

Yet in other cases, a protagonist may undertake an action with no specific or concrete objective in mind, which in the end has disastrous consequences, unforeseen by the protagonist. This last notion is more precisely the kind of ἡμάρτια I have in mind here: a journalistic endeavour undertaken with no precise, concrete objective in mind, which had extremely negative consequences, unforeseen by the protagonist, Michel Foucault. And yet I will indicate that it is very important that Foucault had no precise, concrete objective, that he had little knowledge, that he radiated uncertainty, that he had to engage the problems of Otherness in Iran in an unconventional manner, a manner where uncertainty or vagueness should not be considered a deficiency, a manner I will elaborate on in the last part of the second article in this series as an 'ethics of Self-discomfort'¹.

¹I consider the unnuanced, popular rendering of ἡμάρτια as a tragic flaw in moral composition or 'sinful' in character as imprecise and often misleading, and this obviously is not what I have in mind here. Compare the authoritative explanation by Struck (2004:10, my italics): 'The complex nature of Oedipus' *hamartia* is important ... The Greek term *hamartia*, typically translated as "tragic flaw", actually is closer in meaning to a "mistake" or an "error", "failing", rather than an "innate flaw". In Aristotle's understanding, all tragic heroes have *hamartia*, but this is not inherent in their characters, for then the audience would lose respect for them and be unable to pity them; likewise, if the hero's failing were entirely accidental and involuntary, the audience would not fear for the hero. Instead, the character's flaw must result from something that is also a central part of their virtue, which goes somewhat awry, usually due to a lack of knowledge. By defining the notion this way, Aristotle indicates that a truly tragic hero must have a failing that is neither idiosyncratic nor arbitrary, but is somehow more deeply embedded – a kind of human failing and human weakness. Oedipus fits this precisely, for his basic flaw is his lack of knowledge about his own identity.' I will return to the importance of this notion in the last part of the second article in this series.



Some receptions of Foucault's involvement in Iran consider his lack of knowledge about 'being a journalist' or 'being in Iran' as the main factors contributing to what is described as his critical error in judgement, as his *ḥamartia*, as the consequence of his peculiar Orientalism (Almond 2004, 2007), as the most 'indecipherable event' in his otherwise illustrious career (Paras 2006:57), as the main reason for the many problems surrounding this issue in Foucault scholarship – that, as a West-essentialising 'Greek', he did not belong in the Other-Oriental-posed 'Persia'. But by using the essentially Western concept of *ḥamartia* to introduce the issue of Foucault's involvement in Iran, which at first glance indeed seems to be a wayward, 'Oriental' issue – Persian, not Greek – I attempt to address the issue as precisely a Western problem, to orientate Foucault's Iran excursions as a problem of modernity, with all its palimpsested, Orientalist consequences, in my own attempt to keep the crucial tension between Self and Other, Greek and Persia, West and East, alive. Throughout these two articles, I will therefore accentuate Foucault's involvement in Iran as essentially modern-critical in orientation, characterised by a crucial impetus of consciously, yet problematically crossing over to the Other. This is the strained, tense impression Foucault's Iran writings left on me and I will present it as such: Foucault, along the lines of my reading and reception, was a self-conscious Greek in Persia.

There is indeed a long tradition of bohemian French intellectuals chasing 'distant roars of battles' (Lilla 2003:137–158; Miller 1993:306) to sing the praises of revolutionaries in exotic contexts and finding in them the realisation of their own intellectual hopes (cf. Yang 2005:D4). Was Foucault's involvement in Iran in 1978 to 1979 an embarrassing affirmation of this suspicious tradition? Was Foucault's involvement in Iran therefore 'folly' and a 'farical and tragic error' that fits into a distinctive French tradition of intellectual 'sycophants' (Broyelle & Broyelle 1979:249) leeching on distant revolutions, as perhaps his most eloquent and compassionate biographer, James Miller (1993:309, 315), implies? Or did the Iranian revolution appeal to some of Foucault's integral philosophical preoccupations – of the spontaneous eruption of resistance to established power, of the exploration of the contemporary disclosed limits of rationality, of the philosophical appeal of death, of the dubious nature of discipline, of the enigmatic voices of Otherness, of the violent confrontation with identity, of puzzling labyrinths and dark esoteric corners, of the entropy of madness and the mad creativity unleashed by people willing to risk death? Is Foucault's involvement in Iran to be understood as an investigation into an alternative that was absolutely other to liberal democracy and the nature of the 'political spirituality'² that underlies this alternative? Or was Foucault's search for this kind of alternative gullible and even reckless in the light of Shi'ite Islam's subsequent, post-1978 development in Iran and elsewhere; brutal and violent as it theocratically unfolded, and still unfolds? Did Foucault simply put on record some of the political aspirations of the protesters, or did he really attempt to overturn the unimaginative and antagonistic notions that filled the minds of Western observers who stayed well clear of the events, considering the revolution to be a mere regression to the pre-modern?

2. I will use this concept frequently as it is at the heart of an understanding of Foucault's perspectives on the Iran revolution. Foucault is precise in his use of this otherwise slippery word, 'spirituality'. 'Spiritual experience' for Foucault takes place when a system of relations is transformed and a new set of objects and subjects is configured. Therefore Foucault's use of the term 'spirituality' signifies the possibility to reconfigure an existing set of relations according to some new patterns and to get rid of the grip that established subjectivities and objectivities held on these relations. For Foucault this reconfiguring movement signifies hope in the ongoing quest for freedom. In the specific context of contra-modernity, Foucault argued for the revival of 'political spirituality', in precisely this sense of the word. He was convinced that some resources of past and present cultures could be utilised strategically and selectively to invigorate the consumed resources of modernity: 'How can one analyse the connection between the ways of distinguishing true and false and ways of governing oneself and others? The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the Other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false – this is what I would call "political spirituality"' (Foucault 1991:82).

Was Foucault with his presence and reports in Iran furthering the established theme of always misunderstood (particularly [not] modernised, [not] Westernised) Otherness in his work, as I will accentuate in the concluding section of these two articles? Or was he simply misinformed, becoming nothing less than a misinformant himself, simply duped into trying to become a streetwise journalist, forsaking his intellectual nomenclature and deserving of the taunts of his critics in France, amongst them even veteran leftists such as Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, who urged him to confess his 'mistake' by getting involved in the conflict in the first place (Broyelle & Broyelle 1979:249; Foucault 1979c:249; Macey 2004:128)? Was this a breathtaking mistake, on the same scale and not less damaging as Heidegger's infamous involvement with National Socialism (Lilla 2003:1–46, 137–158)? Did he really deserve the eulogy at his death in 1984 that still lamented 'the mistake we made together' (Foucault's friend Jean Daniel, in Eribon 1992:289; see Lilla 2003:158; Macey 2004:128) In other words: Did Foucault have a flash of insight or did he miss the point entirely?³

I will place myself, with these two articles, in the centre of three remarkable contextualisations and analyses of Foucault's involvement in Iran, explicitly so by Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (2004, 2005), Ian Almond (2004, 2007) and Danny Postel (2006), arguing that the answer is to be found somewhere in the middle of the flash and the void, somewhere in the middle of Foucault's peculiar mixture of naïveté and perceptiveness about the events in Iran in late 1978 and early 1979. These two articles therefore attempt to answer one basic question (and, of course, the delta of questions arising from it): What was Foucault trying to achieve in Iran in 1978 to 1979 as a political journalist, explicitly supporting the cause of the revolting masses and effectively isolating himself from the European intellectual community and Western liberal tradition? Why did Foucault go down this road that left him 'virtually alone' (Afary & Anderson 2005:8)?

I will attempt, in the second article, to answer these questions by explicitly (yet argumentatively) providing an overview of the above-mentioned contributions that recently have been made on this issue in Foucault research, an issue which largely had been neglected in the scholarship for more than two decades. Furthermore, I will attempt in the same article to contribute to and stimulate the debate surrounding this issue by introducing the tense notion of Foucault's 'ethics of Self-discomfort' into this context as a plausible way of broadening our understanding of Foucault's involvement in Iran 1978 to 1979 as indeed deeply philosophical. At a time when religion seems more than ever to be inseparable from politics and Western liberals are (yet again) divided between interventionists and anti-imperialists, Foucault's perspectives on power, revolt, Otherness, 'political spirituality' and an 'ethics of Self-discomfort' may prove to be as significant now as I am convinced they had been in 1978, still holding fundamental consequences for our understanding of the Western liberal tradition and its tense relation to the Western Other.

3. In line with two of Foucault's most erudite commentators, Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, it must be stated at the outset that it is somewhat strange that Foucault's many critics in France at the time never returned to what Foucault himself said about the relation between author, text and audience. Afary and Anderson (2005:1–9) point out that attempts to cluster Foucault's writings on Iran as 'miscellaneous' or even as 'un-Foucauldian' bring to the fore what Foucault himself had criticised years earlier in his 1969 essay, *What is an author?* (Foucault 1977:124–127): When we include certain works in an author's career and exclude others that are stylistically different or seemingly 'substandard', a stylistic unity and a theoretical coherence in the author's mind are presumed, a unity and coherence which, as far as Foucault is concerned, should be absent. The 'author-function' is simply not universal or constant in all discourse. Yet readers do work with these presumptions, according to Foucault, by 'privileging certain writings as authentic and excluding others that do not fit our view of what the author ought to be' (Afary & Anderson 2005:9; 2004:1). Foucault therefore works stylistically with the notion of self-interruption or opened discourse. Many of the caricatures of Foucault's Iran writings depart from the unwillingness to take Foucault seriously on this point.

ERIBON, MILLER AND MACEY: PERSPECTIVES OF THE PIVOTAL BIOGRAPHERS

Foucault developed 'a series of distinctive political and theoretical positions on the Iranian revolution' (Afary & Anderson 2005:3). Yet these positions, until very recently, have been consistently understated in Foucault scholarship. 11 September 2001 (9/11) changed everything though – and Foucault reception is no exception (Kinzer 2008:ix–xxv; cf. Afary & Anderson 2005:163–177). Iraq is, for all practical purposes, now destroyed, not only by the initial American warplanes and artillery – and, of course, the eventual American presence as such – but by internal Shi'ite and Sunni violence. Iraq's dominantly Shi'ite sister, Iran, is now back as an international focal point because of her highly dubious nuclear programme. Washington today, even after the election of Barack Obama as US president in November 2008, seems more fragile than New York ever was, and Tehran seems more viperous and restless than ever. And yet Washington is the one who will be on the offensive – it is Washington that will be on the attack.

With all its Orientalist undertones, it has in my opinion become imperative to revisit Foucault's Iran-mediated take on Western Otherness in the light of the terrible events in New York, Washington and US airspace on that fateful day in September 2001, as well as the Second War in (and on) Iraq and the recent events regarding nuclear fixations in the Middle East. The problem with the East is now more than ever in the West. As convinced as Danny Postel (2006:15) was three years ago, during the most tempestuous period of the second Bush administration, that an attack on Iran was highly probable, I still consider an attack on Iran to be a lurking possibility, even with a seemingly less ruthless politician now holding highest office in the most powerful country in the West.

Following 9/11, prominent commentator, French banker and philosopher Alain Minc, in an intriguing contra-Baudrillard and otherwise nuanced article, harshly and polemically referred to 'Michel Foucault, the advocate for Iranian Khomeinism in 1979, who was therefore theoretically in solidarity with its exactions ...'. Those bitter words appeared in a front-page article in *Le Monde* (Afary & Anderson 2004:4; 2005:6–7; Minc 2001:1, 15). There is in general still a lot of ignorance and malicious slander involved, often describing Foucault as the philosopher who 'energetically endorsed the Iranian revolution and the regime it produced ...'.⁴ This statement and others of its kind simply are not true. Yes, Foucault did endorse the revolution, but did so on very specific modern-critical grounds. Furthermore, according to my reading of his Iran writings, Foucault did not endorse Khomeini's understanding of what an 'Islamic republic' should be, however problematic his seemingly uncritical perspective on Khomeini's 'non-political political position' was, precisely against the decorum of his own theoretical writings on power,⁵ as well as his naïve understanding of clergy organisation in Shi'ite Islam as being 'non-hierarchical'. Though an artificial distinction to some extent, I will argue that these two considerations – his support for the revolution and the uncritical or incautious support for Khomeini – should be kept apart, as far as possible. Following this line, I will argue in my second article, alongside the recent receptions in scholarship mentioned above, that Foucault's writings on Iran were not arbitrary, but in fact closely related to his general theoretical writings on the

discourses of power and the inherent risks of modernity; that these writings are indeed stylistically unique, yet by their very nature and appeal philosophical contributions to his oeuvre in particular and the critique of the project of modernity in general. Older receptions of Foucault have consistently depicted his Iranian writings as anomalous, as a gross political and ethical mistake, even if Foucault did not foresee the extremely negative reaction to those writings, even if he did have another objective, however unclear that objective might have been – considering Foucault in Iran to amount to *hamartia*, in short. Foucault's three pivotal biographers of the 1990s, Didier Eribon (1992), James Miller (1993) and David Macey (1993, 2004), isolate Foucault's Iran expeditions as an event that may indeed have repercussions for a deepening understanding of the Foucault legacy – yet they are all sceptical about setting the issue straight and very reserved about mending Foucault's wounded reputation.

Eribon (1992:281–295) writes extensively on this episode, providing for the first time in Foucault literature a balanced and nuanced account of its biographical and intellectual-historical relevance. Yet he gives a clear indication that Foucault made a mistake by accepting the offer to go to Iran, eventually – very soon, within months actually – compromising his stature as Europe's leading intellectual in the 1970s. Throughout his discussion Eribon clearly indicates that the incident wounded not only Foucault's reputation, but also Foucault himself on a personal and intellectual level: In the five years Michel Foucault had left to live, he would never again deal publicly with politics and social commentary – he simply distanced himself from it, traumatised until his death by the hostile reception of his Iran writings.

Miller (1993:306–318), in a rigorous yet highly sceptical account, provides the scholarship with the presumed philosophical tenets of Foucault's visits to Iran and an initial platform in the English-speaking world for a further investigation into the intellectual relevance of the event. For example, Miller is the only one of these three biographers to suggest that Foucault's philosophical fascination with death⁶ played a part in his enthusiasm for the Iranian Islamists, with their emphasis on mass martyrdom (Afary & Anderson 2005:33–34; Miller 1993:307, 313). Yet Miller concluded that the Iran episode reflects a 'tragic error' in judgement, a 'folly' over which Foucault remained 'unrepentant' (Miller 1993:309, 312): Again, *hamartia*, and quite clearly so.

Macey's account (1993:406–411) is possibly the most sympathetic or at least equivocal of all three these initial accounts, although it is still clearly reserved about any possible merit of Foucault's involvement in the conflict. Macey (1993:410) regards the French attacks on Foucault over Iran as exaggerated and often malicious, yet he is clear about his conviction that Foucault was so 'impressed' by what he saw in Iran in 1978 that he hopelessly 'misread the probable future developments he was witnessing'. In his shorter monography on Foucault, Macey implies that the event has only a marginal effect on our reception and understanding of Foucault, stating that 'in fairness, he [Foucault] was not the only one to misread the situation' (Macey 2004:128).⁷ Macey is fair and balanced in his summary of the Iran

4. See http://www.commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/danny_postel/2007/09/remember_our_real_iranian_frie.html. The extremely negative caricature of 'Michel Foucault, the champion of Khomeini's bloodshed' must at all costs be addressed in Foucault research. A revisitation of the initial and contemporary receptions as well as the philosophical significance of Foucault's writings on Iran has in the light of the events of 9/11, the war in/on Iraq and Tehran's nuclear programme become urgent and highly consequential.

5. One major problem in this section of Foucault research is that Foucault was far less outspoken about his reserves regarding the violent aftermath of the revolution than he was about the revolution itself.

6. Foucault, fascinated by the subjects of dying, pain, madness and limits, often linked up with surrealist and avant-garde intellectuals such as Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot: 'In them, Foucault saw the possibility of exploring personally what lay outside the bounds of ordinary bourgeois practice, to seek what he called "limit experience" in eroticism, madness, drugs, sadomasochism and even suicide' (Lilla 2003:141, echoing the prominent argumentative position of James Miller [1993]).

7. Because only three of Foucault's final fifteen articles on the Iranian Revolution (and none of his interviews with exiles, mullahs and demonstrators) have appeared in English before Afary and Anderson (2005:181–277) translated and republished all of these articles and many of these interviews, they have in the previous two decades generated little discussion in the English-speaking world. Apart from the biographies of Eribon, Miller and Macey, elsewhere in the English-speaking world, where Foucault's writings on Iran have only been scarcely translated and the French responses to him at the time not translated at all, his Iran excursion and the writings stemming from this excursion have been treated with far less hostility. His last two articles on Iran for instance (Foucault 1979a–b), where he eventually did make a few criticisms of the Islamic regime in the face of the attacks on him by other French in



issue regarding Foucault's *œuvre*, but very sceptical about re-interpreting the event in a more productive philosophical way. Foucault made a mistake. For Macey, that is the end of the story. Nothing could change that mistake and it would actually be unproductive to further ponder on the issue. One may add that a fourth biographer, Jeanette Colombel, a close associate and friend of Foucault, in her untranslated French monography also refers, albeit with considerable understatement, to his 'error' in Iran and confirmed that the incident 'wounded' him (cited from Afary & Anderson 2005:7).

Contemporary receptions of Foucault are far more inclined to revisit the issue, as I will indicate in the second article. Yet it has to be said that these authoritative biographies, however sceptical, have paved the way for a renewed interest in this issue, especially so in the light of the terrible events of 9/11, the Second Iraqi War and the way the issues of power, the Western Other and political spirituality are approached in the first decade of the 21st century, with Tehran's unique self-esteem still radiating in the desert skies.

IRAN, SEPTEMBER 1978 TO APRIL 1979: INTO THE FURNACE

In an unforgettable account of the events of September 1978 in Iran, Miller wrote:

Every forty days, the masses re-appeared to mourn, as Shi'ite Muslims do, the thousands that died; and every forty days, the police and army would attack, producing more martyrs – a country with one of the most lethal armies in the world was in the third quarter of 1978 sinking into chaos, faced with a population seemingly eager to die.

(Miller 1993:306–307)

The protesters characteristically wore white shrouds, as a sign of their willingness to face death (Afary & Anderson 2005:38). The world was witnessing one of the greatest populist explosions in human history (Miller 1993:306–307, 451[footnote 79]), which was becoming an embodiment of Marx's famous comment that 'religion is the heart of a heartless world'. From September 1978 to February 1979, in the course of this monumental revolution with its millions of participants, the Iranian people overthrew the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979), who had pursued a dictatorial program of economic and cultural modernisation over the course of 25 years (Cottam 1990:3). The Shah's regime had never gained a broad base in Iranian society, but had acquired a measure of legitimacy in the two decades following a coup, backed by the CIA, that had brought him to power in 1953 (Bakhash 1986:48–63; Gasiorowski 1987:263; Kinzer 2008:1–29; Leezenberg 2004:99). By the mid 1970s, protests against the repressive nature of the regime and widespread corruption in Iran started to increase dramatically. The Shah reacted by intensifying political repression on the one hand, while on the other hand introducing lacklustre reforms, which only proved to nourish the potential for further organised resistance. Initially the demonstrations calling for substantial reforms were led by secularised, left-wing, urban-based intellectuals, but from 8 January 1978 onwards the Shi'ite Iranian clergy was fully mobilised into internal warfare after a demonstration by Shi'ite seminary students in Qom led to a confrontation with security forces, which left 20 of the students dead. From that event onwards, resistance against the Shah would be centred around religious institutions and would be organised by urban as well

as non-urban mullahs, intensely influenced by the high ranking Shi'ite scholars (the *'ulamā*) (Bakhash 1986:48–63; Leezenberg 2004:100; Rodinson 1978:233).

By late 1978, the Islamist faction led by these Shi'ite mullahs, loyal to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who still was in exile in the Shi'ite holy city of Najaf in Iraq at the time, had come to dominate the anti-Shah uprising, in which even secular nationalists, democrats and liberal Iranian intellectuals participated (Cottam 1990:5; Miller 1993:309). The Shi'ite Islamists fully controlled the organisation of the protests, which for example meant that many secular women protesters were pressured into donning the veil as an expression of solidarity with Shi'ite Iranian Muslims (Afary & Anderson 2004:4; 2005:2, 72–74). By 16 January 1979, the Shah had left the country. Khomeini returned from exile on 1 February 1979 – the last few months of his 15-year exile spent in Paris – to take power. A provisional government led by Shahpour Bakhtiar tried to introduce quick reforms, but it was perceived to be too closely associated with the Shah for it to have any public support and it was simply ousted in a three-day uprising from 10 to 12 February 1979 (Afary & Anderson 2005:108–109; Leezenberg 2004:100). Among the groups that led the revolution, a fierce competition for supremacy was now developing. In the anarchy that followed the Bakhtiar provisional government, a powerful but uncontrolled, volatile and explosive new force was formed all over Iran: The so-called revolutionary committees or *komitehs*, which was responsible for much of the carnage that was to follow (Bakhash 1986:48–63).

After Khomeini returned to Iran, he immediately began to assume absolute power, even to a large extent over the *komitehs*, providing them with 'revolutionary courts', a new and draconian code of justice which essentially implied a free hand to impose capital punishment and swift public executions. Thousands of Iranians associated with the old regime – if only by rumour – were rounded up and tortured, or summarily executed, or both. Homosexuals were dispatched to firing squads. Adulterers, which simply could mean anyone talking with an unrelated person of the opposite sex – or often simply anyone accused of adultery – were stoned to death. Iran in the first months of 1979 became a ruthless theocracy, inspired by Khomeini's understanding of 'Islamic government' (see Afary & Anderson 2005:108; Miller 1993:312). On 30 and 31 March 1979 a national referendum was held, and the outcome was confirmed on 1 April 1979, declaring Iran an 'Islamic republic' by an overwhelming majority.

From September 1978 to April 1979 everything changed in Iran. It really was a revolution in the most rigid sense of the word. But the religious fervour providing the revolution with all its force was not going to go away once victory was obtained – 'the mullahs were not going to return sensibly to their mosques' (Leezenberg 2004:100). They had drawn blood, had had a glimpse of what absolute power could do, and had become the judges and executioners of this bloody new dispensation. The bloodshed of the last quarter in 1978 suddenly seemed ignorable given the utter carnage that followed Khomeini and the *komitehs*' vicious execution of power in the first and second quarters of 1979. Between ten and twelve thousand Iranians died in the uprising of late 1978 – but thousands more during the bloody aftermath in the first quarter of 1979 alone.⁸

(footnote 7 continues...)

Intellectuals, have in fact been the most widely circulated ones among those that have appeared in English up to 2005. They are also the only English examples of his Iran writings to be found in the three-volume collection, *The Essential Writings of Michel Foucault* (Foucault 2000). Up to this day, relatively few scholars outside the French-speaking world realise exactly how hostile (e.g. Broyelle & Broyelle 1979:247–249) the French reactions towards Foucault were and how sensitive and consequential this matter really is in Foucault scholarship. Yet reactions in the English-speaking world, however sporadic, were sometimes very hostile: '[Foucault's Iran writings are] a symptom of something troubling in the kind of left-wing thinking that mixes postmodernism, simplistic thirdworldism and illiberal inclination' (the political theorist Mitchell Cohen, cited from Afary & Anderson 2005:7).

8. In-depth reading on the broader socio-political and socio-historical contexts of the Iranian revolution, and ultimately the bloodshed in the first quarter of 1979, would in my opinion have to include the following sections in or otherwise the complete works of Abrahamian (1982:496–530; 1993:60–87), Afshari (2001:14–32), Arjomand (1989:91–176), Bakhash (1986 – an outstanding introduction), Cottam (1990:3–15), Dabashi (2005 – a post-9/11 updated version of a celebrated introduction, first published in 1993), Esposito (2003:26–70), Halm (1997 – a sober introduction to Sunni-Shi'ite oppositions by a philosophically erudite historian from Tübingen), Hiro (2000:103–135), Kinzer (2003:ix–xxv, 119–133), Kurzman (2004 – a balanced overview of the revolution from organisational, religious, cultural and military perspectives), Martin (2003:100–165), Milani (1994:59–104), Momen (1987:246–299), Mortimer (1982:296–376), Mottahedeh (2000 – the complete book is crucial for orientation; this is the revised and updated version; in terms of depth, scope and eloquence, this book has no rival), Parsa (1989:91–222) and Vahdat (2002 – an introduction to the intellectual basis of the modernisation of Iran).

Progressive and leftist intellectuals around the world were initially much divided in their assessments of the Iranian revolution. The repression that turned demonstrations and processions into bloodbaths in 1978 had aroused revulsion against the Shah's regime and sympathy for the Iranian people. Everyone, it seems, eventually hoped that the Shah would leave Iran; but no one bothered about what would happen afterwards. While some Western liberals supported the overthrow of the Shah on the grounds of violation of human rights issues, they were far less enthusiastic about the notion of an Islamic republic (Eribon 1992:289). And most if not all Western liberals considered any notion of rehabilitating Islamic tradition for guiding government and the life-world system in Iran as regressive, if not barbaric (Miller 1993:309–310). Yet Michel Foucault resisted the *de rigueur* quality of these reserves. Rather interested in the contra-modern nature of the uprising itself, he was intrigued by the quality of the mass spirituality the world was confronted with in the last quarter of 1978. The resistance to modernity and modernisation must have been, for him, just too obvious.

Few would dispute the fact that when Foucault went to Tehran in 1978, he was France's dominant and probably most celebrated public intellectual, renowned for a critique of modernity carried out through radical dissections of modern institutions that reversed the conventional wisdom about, amongst others, government, prisons, madness and sexuality. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault (1995) argued, for instance, that liberal democracy was in fact a 'disciplinary society' with a ferocious 'governmentality' that punished with less physical severity in order to punish with greater efficiency. Foucault's unique counternarrative of the Enlightenment suggested that the modern institutions we trust to liberate humanity (the state, the clinic, the penal system, the asylum, the self-reforming church and so on) were in fact enslaving us in always reconfigured and deceptive ways, cunningly shifting the focus of discipline from the external to the internal, from our bodies to our 'souls'. His whole *œuvre* could be read as a revolt against this governmentality – and he found the perfect context for illustrating that revolt in this actual revolution, one that seemed to despise modern Western governmentality as much as he did.

Foucault's critical perspectives on modernity, based on his analysis of modern discourses of power, were highly original. He postulated that modern power is not only repressive and negative or restrictive, but also productive, positive, or 'discursive', as he liked to call it (e.g. 1995:27). Power is everywhere, it is pervasive. It crawls through the web of all social, political and economic relations. Power is not merely being exercised 'from above' – being everywhere, it is being exercised (from) everywhere. In the modern sense, knowledge is power, yet in the Foucauldian sense, power is knowledge.

It is now almost trivial to state that Foucault's historical studies on the asylum, the hospital, the school, the prison, the military, and so on, focused on what he called 'modern technologies of power', which create 'docile bodies'. These technologies of power operate according to a very simple principle, which I call the 'OCNE principle': 'observe, control, normalise and examine' (Foucault 1995:173). Modernity therefore firstly aspires to the panoptical position, the 'single gaze which sees everything constantly', by employing a hierarchical method of observation, as manifested in prisons, army barracks, hospitals, asylums, schools and so on. What follows is a 'normalising judgement', the postulation of a set of rules that requires continuous observance. Soldiers, mental patients, students and prisoners, for example, internalise these rules. They are all now subject to a 'small penal mechanism' (see Afary & Anderson 2005:14 for a solid introduction on this issue). This mechanism 'compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, excludes; in short, it *normalises*' (Foucault 1995:183).

Eventually the 'examination' follows, by which Foucault indicated the internalised-ritualised process that rewards

the conformists and penalises the non-conformists. In other words: modern power operates by gathering knowledge about individuals (such as prisoners or patients), knowledge through which they are constantly monitored. Foucault's crucial point was that the system only really becomes successful once this disciplinary power is enforced not only by the doctor, warden, psychologist, army officer, factory supervisor or teacher, but also by the individual subject, who has internalised it as a necessity, a 'ritual', of modern life. Modern power aspires in this way to maximum intensity and as little resistance as possible, to increase 'the docility of the elements in the system', to keep them quiet and in their place (Foucault 1995:217).

Initially Foucault was convinced that there could be no effective challenge to this unitary, disciplinary nature of modern power. Yet later on in his career, toward the end of the 1970s, during the completion of the first two volumes of his unfinished trilogy, *History of Sexuality*, Foucault seems to begin to allow for 'local resistances': Since power is everywhere, even at the most micro levels of society, points of resistance might be present everywhere in the same power network. Foucault, as I will indicate from the primary texts, would engage the revolution in Iran exactly from this angle. (See Afary & Anderson 2005:14–17 for an eloquent introduction to and exposition of the OCNE principle, with specific regards to Foucault's theoretical framework approaching the revolution.)

The biographical details of Foucault's trips to Iran are now well documented.⁹ During the course of 1977 Foucault was invited to write a regular column as special correspondent for the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*. Although it is not unusual for European newspapers to solicit reports from prominent intellectuals, Foucault never made clear why he accepted the offer and, especially important, never indicated clear objectives for the philosophical nature of such an undertaking (Eribon 1992:281; Miller 1993:308). He was interestingly vague about it:

The contemporary world is teeming with ideas that spring up, stir around, disappear or reappear, and shake up people and things. This is not something that happens only in intellectual circles or in the universities of Western Europe; it also happens on a world scale and it happens particularly among minorities that, because of history, have not up to now been in the habit of speaking up or making themselves heard ... There are more ideas on earth than intellectuals imagine. And these ideas are more active, stronger, more resistant and more passionate than 'politicians' think. We have to be there at the birth of ideas, the bursting outward of their force: not in books expressing them, but in events manifesting this force, in struggles carried on around ideas, for or against them. Ideas do not rule the world. But it is because the world has ideas (and because it constantly produces them) that it is not passively ruled by those who are its leaders or those who would like to teach it, once and for all, what we must think. This is the direction we want these 'journalistic reports' to take. An analysis of thought will be linked to an analysis of what is happening. Intellectuals will work together with journalists at the point where ideas and events intersect.

(Foucault, cited in Eribon 1992:282)

This explanation still does not make clear what the philosophical nature of that intersection would be, to what extent the intellectual would have to become a journalist. And this is in high probability the beginning of the problem for many Foucault scholars, in the sense that they still have no clear indication what Foucault's 'intellectual objectives' were. If it is true that lack of knowledge about his identity is the cause of his presumed *hamartia*, it is exactly at this point – Foucault the journalist in the Orient or Foucault the Western philosopher? – that the problems for many of the older Foucault receptions in particular began. Foucault was indeed unclear about his philosophical

9. See Eribon (1992:281–288), Afary and Anderson (2004:2; 2005:69–111), Miller (1993:306–309) and Leezenberg (2004:99–101).



disposition: 'I go to see what is happening, rather than referring to what is taking place abroad without being informed in a way that is precise, meticulous and to the extent possible, generous' (Foucault, cited in Miller 1993:308[footnote 82]).

This is at first sight a rather confusing remark, yet typical of the stylistic uniqueness, the vagueness, the hesitant nature of his Iran writings – which I consider to be thematically important. From the style and content of his Iran writings itself it is clear that Foucault, philosophically, was displaced in Iran and that he lacked the comfort of what he would normally have recognised as 'discourse'. It is from their presentation and content clear that these writings are stylistically unique – they certainly are not philosophical essays, even by Foucault's own open-ended understanding of discourse (see footnote 4) – yet by their clear and decisive modern-critical claims, I will argue that they were philosophical contributions to his oeuvre in particular and his critique of the project of modernity in general, exactly because of their hesitant, self-interrupting nature. Foucault is hesitant in Iran – and even those who have even only a rudimentary knowledge of his basic writings would agree that Foucault 'in the West' never strikes one as being unsure or hesitant – rather extremely assertive, provocative and challenging.

However unsure about and uncomfortable with the unknown philosophical 'order of things' they might have led to, Foucault nevertheless accepted the offer to present the newspaper his writings and negotiated terms with the editor of *Corriere della Sera* for their publication. Foucault was at least sure that his contributions (eventually comprising a total of fifteen articles and interviews, republished in French in Foucault [1994], translated and published in Persian [Foucault 1998] and recently fully translated in English by and republished in Afary & Anderson 2005:181–277) would not be conventional philosophical analyses but 'on-the-scene investigations' (Eribon 1992:281, 289), or a 'journalism of ideas' (Leezenberg 2004:99), or one of his 'present histories' (Beukes 2004:884). His articles would appear on page one of *Corriere della Sera*, titled 'Michel Foucault Investigates', yet other parts of his writings on Iran would be published in French newspapers and journals, such as the daily *Le Monde* and the widely circulated leftist weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* (see Foucault 1978a–g; 1979a–b). Student activists translated at least one of his essays into Persian and posted it on the walls of Tehran University in the last quarter of 1978 (Afary & Anderson 2004:3; 2005:70–77). The mentioned Persian translation and publication of his Iran writings would follow only two decades later (Foucault 1998), yet still years before they would be available in English.

Unsure as he was about the philosophical consequences of his endeavour, Foucault was otherwise well prepared for this journalistic expedition to Iran.¹⁰ Working with his project coordinator Thierry Voeltzel and seeking out the company of other foreign journalists, he interviewed a variety of sources, talking to representatives of the Shah's army, to American advisers, to opposition leaders such as Mehdi Bazargan and Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, as well as to Ayatollah Shari'atmadari, at the time widely regarded as the most influential yet moderate of Iran's mainstream religious leaders (Foucault 1978a:190; Miller 1993:308), who for example opposed the participation of the 'ulamâ, the higher Shi'ite clergy, in government. He received updates on developments and addresses for contacts from informants such as Ahmad Salamati, a Parisian-based, secularised Iranian intellectual, in exile since 1965, who was to become deputy minister of Foreign Affairs in the short-lived post-revolutionary government. He studied Paul Vieille's well-respected sociological studies on Iran and Henry Corbin's magisterial four-volume work on Iranian Islamic philosophy

and spirituality (Leezenberg 2004:101) and called philosopher friends such as André Glucksmann and Alain Finkielkraut (Eribon 1992:282).

Foucault therefore went off to Tehran in mid-September 1978 on the first of two trips (the second in the second half of November 1978, when the reaction against the Shah was reaching its brutal climax), in the company of Voeltzel, to spend ten days with the demonstrators on the streets of Iran. It was just days after 'Black Friday', 8 September 1978, when the Shah's army had shot into a crowd on Djaleh Square in Tehran, leaving as many as four thousand Iranians dead (although the number of actual fatalities on the day has always been in dispute). After Black Friday, the popular rallying call was for the Shah's departure, rather than reconciliation or reform (Leezenberg 2004:100; Miller 1993:308). Foucault was walking into this furnace – yet a strange one, where no one seemed to be afraid of burning to death:

When I arrived in Iran, immediately after the September massacres, I said to myself that I was going to find a terrorised city, because there had been four thousand dead. Now I can't say that I found happy people, but there was an absence of fear and an intensity of courage, or rather, the intensity that people were capable of when danger, though still not removed, had already been transcended.

(Foucault 1988:220)

FOUCAULT'S IRAN WRITINGS, 28 SEPTEMBER 1978 TO 12 MAY 1979

Before we proceed to the most consequential of Foucault's Iran writings, this obvious intra-philosophical question must have bothered the critical reader from the outset: How did a philosopher who specialised his whole academic life in themes of particularity become a journalist, generalising experience, as journalists typically have to do? Foucault, engaging this project, was not completely new to journalism: in France he had been closely involved in launching *Libération* and he had been a regular contributor to *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Eribon 1992:281). Yet he was completely new to being a journalist in the proper sense of the word, speaking on behalf of others, or 'saying what others are saying about others', as journalists typically do. A close associate of Foucault, Jonathan Rée (2005:46), points out that unlike some other contemporary figures of French intellectual life, Foucault was always 'reluctant to air his opinions about big political issues'. It was not that Foucault was uninterested in politics or indifferent to human suffering, certainly not, but rather that he was suspicious of the species of intellectuals – 'universal intellectuals' as he often referred to them – who consider it their privilege and duty to set the world right, 'as if history had appointed them to speak on its behalf, or morality had summoned them to be the conscience of the human race' (Rée 2005:46).

But even more relevant to our discussion, Foucault was a philosopher of particularity – and journalists need to generalise their stories for it to have effect and street credibility. Journalists tell the human story of the event – while Foucault typically tells us stories of marginalised subjects outside events. Indeed, anyone who has read Foucault's famous dissections of typical modern institutions – the aforementioned *Discipline and Punish*, or the preceding *Madness and Civilization*, published in the very early 1960s, or the thematic-parallel *Birth of the Clinic*, to the unfinished tri-volume *History of Sexuality*, which he was still working on when he died in 1984 – will understand why Foucault must have found it difficult to be a journalist, to speak in the name of others. He had an immense respect for the Other's otherness.

Foucault was a historian, however unconventional, who spent the best part of his life studying very old documents in the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir in Paris. But he was also a social philosopher with a specialised interest in those small-scale processes in the webs of social interests, or 'particularities', or 'micro-power', as he called it, that

10. See Miller (1993:308), Eribon (1992:283–284), Afary and Anderson (2005:70–77), Macey (1993:408) and Leezenberg (2004:101).

travel through the labyrinths and dark corners of the institutions in and by which we live. Foucault was constantly on the lookout for themes that refused to conform to the 'normal' ways of established notions and conventions – he was interested in particularities, idiosyncrasies, uniquenesses and discrepancies. He was a poet of the uncommonplace: to a great extent, in a striking description, 'a philosopher of the unphilosophical, a historian of the unhistorical and a politician of the unpolitical' (Rée 2005:46). Given this already complex philosophical position, the mere fact that Foucault accepted the invitation to go on the road to Tehran as a journalist could seem like opting for a treacherous road, full of traps.

Yet, consciously self-displaced as he was in Iran, Foucault did not want to be read as a lost or trapped philosopher. Throughout his life, Foucault's 'concept of authenticity' meant looking at situations 'where people lived dangerously and flirted with death' (an often-repeated phrase in Afary & Anderson 2005), that dangerous realm where Nietzschean creativity originates. In the tradition of the famous yet notorious Western contra-modern prophets of extremity, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Georges Bataille, Foucault embraced the intellectual who pushed the limits of rationality. He wrote with great passion in defence of irrationalities that broke new boundaries. In 1978, Foucault found exactly that kind of morbid transgressive powers in the revolutionary figure of Khomeini and the millions who risked death as they followed him in the course of the revolution. He knew that such 'limit' experiences could lead to new forms of creativity and he, as I will show his Iran writings clearly indicate, passionately threw in his support for their cause. This was Foucault's only first-hand experience of revolution and it led to his most extensive set of writings on a non-Western society (see Afary & Anderson 2004:2).¹¹ What then, did Foucault physically encounter in that furnace, in and on the streets of Tehran in September 1978? And what did he make of those encounters?

The army – when the earth quakes (Foucault 1978a:189–194)

In his very first article for *Corriere della Sera*, published on 28 September 1978, Foucault set the scene for every one of the articles that were to follow, by hinting with subtlety at first, eventually becoming very direct, at the intervention of the Shah's army in the Iranian people's everyday lives as a modern, panoptic event – via his army the Shah is there, he sees everything, he is, in this panoptic sense, the ultimate politician:

When you arrive at the airport after curfew, a taxi takes you at breakneck speed through the streets of the city. They are empty. The only things slowing the car down are the roadblocks set up by men with machine guns. Woe betide if the driver does not see them. They shoot. All up and down the Avenue Reza Shah, silent now, as far as the eye can see, red lights and green lights flash off and on in vain, like the watch ticking on the wrist of a dead man. This is the undivided rule of the Shah.

(Foucault, cited in Eribon 1992:283)

Against the backdrop of the 'first painful experience' of the modern state (namely the way the early modern vision of a clear, lucid society in France, England and Germany eventually paved the way for industrial capitalism to emerge as the 'harshest and most savage society one could possibly imagine' [Foucault 1979d:184–185]), Foucault describes the brutality and 'methodical coldness' of the Iranian army as a visible by-product of Iran's own industrial capitalism. Iran's industrialism, the hallmark of its modernisation, brought about a first-class army, which very soon became a tool for oppression in the modern sense, namely an instrument to observe and control. The Iranians had to be observed and controlled by the fifth largest army in the world at the time, a US-trained army which was organised exactly according to the same weaponry divisions and disciplinary structures as any modern Western army. Actually, Foucault noted, there were four armies: One for the 'surveillance and the administration of the whole territory', a second for the 'Shah's protection' (the so-called Immortals, 'his own Praetorian guard ... his Janissaries'), a third, the combat army, which seeks and destroys, and a fourth – the forty thousand American advisors to the Shah at the time, who naturally controlled the Iranian cultural landscape with their 'advice'. The Shah is the panoptic centre of this all-encompassing modern intervention, this observing and intervening army (Foucault 1978a:191). There was no veritable general staff in this army. Each unit was directly linked to the Shah himself, with internal police conducting tight control and surveillance amongst soldiers themselves; an army, in the last instance, not a tool for defence against others, but for controlling the self, a tool of identity (Foucault 1978a:191).

On Black Friday the magnitude of this Pahlavian panopticon was clearly demonstrated. Foucault finds it very meaningful that the unthinkable, in the modern military sense, happened on Black Friday: At least on one officially reported occasion, an Iranian officer was shot by his own men when he gave his men an order to shoot at the crowd. In the Western military context, disobeying an order is taboo. Killing an officer who is himself executing an order, is unthinkable. Yet it happened. Some soldiers who could bring themselves to execute the order to shoot at the crowd committed suicide the next day (Foucault 1978a:193). Since the Shah was guilty of the ultimate transgression in Shi'ite Islam – 'Shi'ite soldiers shooting Shi'ite civilians' – it was to be expected that the wheel would turn, that this version of modernity would turn in against itself: 'Soldier, my brother, why shoot your brother?' (Foucault 1978c:200).

A close reading of Foucault's first article on the position of the Iranian Army in September 1978 brings one to the fundamental conclusion: Foucault was convinced that the Iranian army, as a concretisation of hyper-modernity, in a country that was eager to leave modernity behind, would turn against itself; that modernity in Iran would eventually destroy modernity in Iran, with tools made possible by modernity itself.

The Shah is a hundred years behind the times (Foucault 1978b:194–198)

How self-conscious this Greek in Persia really was, is clear from Foucault's second article for *Corriere della Sera*, published on 1 October 1978. This second article was even more forthright in its modern-critical position than the first. The initial Western interpretation of the events that were heightening the sense of crisis in 1978 in Iran was, particularly in Europe, an established one: In the liberal mind, the Shah embodied the positive and productive forces of Enlightenment; of 'modernisation' and 'secularisation'. The Shah, according to the up-curve of modern *telos*, had the future on his side, while those who opposed the Shah were considered a loose assembly of antiquated peasants and religious fanatics who had yet to adjust to the reality of the modern world. But Foucault makes it clear in this second article that his informants in Iran saw things very differently. As far as they were concerned, their struggle was as much against corruption as against modernisation – actually, these

11. Although *Corriere della Sera* datelined the articles 'Tehran', Foucault actually wrote them in France, upon the return of his two visits to Iran, the first from 16 to 24 September 1978 and the second from 9 to 15 November 1978. Since *Corriere della Sera* translated the articles into Italian, they were not immediately available in French. As mentioned, Foucault did publish extracts and summaries of those articles in French publications as well, notably the widely circulated *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Monde* (see Afary & Anderson 2005:181). I will not be discussing all fifteen writings (Foucault 1978a–h; 1979a–b), but only seven articles, cross-referring to the remaining eight articles. I consider these seven articles to be the most representative of the content and tone of his writings, and the most consequential in terms of his broader philosophical project, namely his critique of modernity, which is the basis of my reception of Foucault's work in general. I am willing to acknowledge that this reception, focusing on the modern-critical issues in his Iran writings, is somewhat idea-typical, perpetuating his unique Orientalism, and that it is perhaps even reductive and elementary. Yet the basis of my reception, with all its possible Orientalist consequences, stands undisputed in Foucault's Iran writings, especially in his first four articles (Foucault 1978:a–d). All quotations from Foucault's Iran writings will be placed in the main text and not in footnotes, as I will attempt to weave Foucault's words with my own, apart from having the desire that Foucault's words actually be read and not overlooked, as is often the case with argumentative text in footnotes.



two were perceived to be linked from the outset. The 'honest people' of the West turned a blind eye to the 'speculation, corrupt practices, embezzlement and swindling that constitute the veritable daily bread of their trade, their industry and their finances' (Rée 2005:46), but for the protesters a blind eye was no longer possible. Corruption in Iran was clearly the 'dynasty's way of exercising power and a fundamental mechanism of the economy' (Rée 2005:46), the ultimate power of 'that dreadful ensemble of modernism – despotism – corruption' (Eribon 1992:283). Foucault immediately took this ensemble, this contra-modern notion, against the backdrop of his agitation for insight into the failures of the modern project on the one hand, and the acknowledgement of socio-religious particularity on the other, seriously. He consciously went against the grain of the conventional European perspective on the revolution, that 'unimaginative' (Foucault 1978b:196) perspective which considered the revolution to be simply regressive and a free-fall back into the pre-modern, by accentuating the modern-critical undertones of this revolt:

There was a detail that struck me when I visited the bazaar, which had just reopened after more than a week of strikes. There were dozens and dozens of incredible sewing machines lined up in the stalls, big and elaborate the way 19th century newspaper advertisements show them. They were decorated with drawings of ivy, climbing plants and flower buds, in crude imitation of old Persian miniatures. All these out-of-service Westernisms wearing the signs of an out-of-date East also bore the inscription: 'Made in South Korea'. I felt then that I understood that recent events did not represent a withdrawal of the most outdated groups before a modernisation that is too brutal. It was, rather, the rejection by an entire culture, an entire people, of a modernisation that is an archaism in itself. It is the Shah's misfortune to be of one piece with this archaism. His crime is that he maintains through corruption and despotism this fragment of the past in a present that wants nothing to do with it anymore.

(Foucault 1978b:195, see Eribon 1992:283–284)

Foucault continues:

Modernisation as a political project and as a principle of social change is a thing of the past in Iran ... With the current Iranian regime in its death throes, we are present at the final moments of an episode that began almost sixty years ago: the attempt to modernise Islamic countries in a European mode ... Consequently, I beg of you, let's hear no more talk in Europe about the fortunes and misfortunes of a ruler who is too modern for a country that is too old. The Shah is what is old here in Iran. He is fifty, even a hundred years behind. He is as old as predatory sovereigns. His is the antiquated dream of opening up his country by means of secularisation and industrialisation. But his project of modernisation, his despotic weapons, his system of corruption are what is archaic today.

(Foucault 1978b:198; see Eribon 1992:284)

Foucault was in these sections clearly aspiring toward another political imagination, which would escape the stranglehold of modernism. Foucault evidently did not view modernity in Iran as an ad hoc problem, a case of modernity being temporarily derailed by corruption, or a localised crisis of modernity, or a mere social problem, but as a problem of the crisis of modernity itself (Foucault 1978b:194). It is modernisation itself that is an archaism (Foucault 1978b:195). It is clear that Foucault considers the failure of modernisation in Iran as a consequent chapter in a series of stinging failures, which started in the 1920s proper: the modernising of Islamic countries in a European fashion. If modernity was clearly failing in Europe, as Foucault was absolutely convinced – the same old Europe which gave birth to, nourished and embraced Enlightenment – does it not speak for itself that it was going to fail in any country where there is an 'Other-posed' resistance to the project of modernity, as Foucault repeatedly accentuates with regards to Iran (1978a:194; 1978b:196; 1978c:201; 1979c:184–186)?

Furthermore, if this resistance to modernity is not merely a fundamentalist religious reaction, but clearly a resistance to the

bulwark of modernity, namely the notion of progress through the rationalisation of the life-world system, with all its corrupt and oppressive consequences, should it not be taken seriously? If it is clear that not even a 'reasonable modernisation', which would be willing to 'take cultural identity into account' (Foucault 1978b:196), will escape from being a 'dead weight' (1978b:197), why not recognise that it is modernity that is failing humanity, and not humanity failing modernity? If it is clear that modernity, and the industrial capitalism it spawned, will always in the end boil down to a 'gigantic (mis)appropriation of goods' (1978b:198), its dividends being 'distributed like spoils' (1978b:198) to the Shah and, one could add, his most infamous Western peers – those slick CEOs, callous investors and industrial magnates who crashed the world markets in late 2008 – is it not time to recognise the failure of modernity in even the most brutal of senses, that of the economical – again, one could add, as the international economic collapse of late 2008 bears witness to?

Tehran: Faith against the Shah (Foucault 1978c:198–203)

This is exactly where Foucault took off in his third article for *Corriere della Sera*, published on 8 October 1978. Juxtaposing socio-economic spaces in Tehran, describing it as a 'divided city', with the Hilton Hotel (and the Shah's palace) on the one side and the 'empty molds' created by industrialisation, urbanisation and growing poverty among the Iranian people on the other, Foucault discussed the ways modernity fundamentally 'displaced' Iranians under the auspices of the Shah (Foucault 1978c:199, see Vahdat 2002:1–30). Ironically, the urban poor had only one refuge: the mosques (Afary & Anderson 2005:82–83). Modernity drove the urban poor to the religious spaces where they and their children would be fed, clothed and taken care of. Foucault described this modernised Iran, with its poor at the entrances of mosques, as a 'rootless geography', with nothing to offer the people of Iran and yet nothing, it seems, to answer for (Foucault 1978c:199). Fascinated by the spontaneous eruption of resistance against these divisions that were created by the many economic and industrial programmes of modernity, Foucault described this energy of resistance as a 'matter of belief', a 'simple vocabulary' and an 'elemental organisation' against the injustices modernity brought to Iran (Foucault 1978c:200, 202). It is not simply a sub-economical reaction from an impoverished context; rather, it is a refined and eloquent worldview against the 'worldview of this liberal, modern, westernised regime' (Foucault 1978d:204). It seems to be Persia's 'surprising destiny' (Foucault 1978c:203), its 'peculiar destiny' (Foucault 1978d:208), to have invented the state and government at the dawn of history, yet to have derived a religion which never ceased to give an 'irreducible strength to people to oppose state power' (Foucault 1978c:203). It was in Foucault's mind Persia's destiny to be the indicator of the bankrupt nature of modernity's ruthless relation of progress and the legitimisation of suffering. In this regard, that religion – Shi'ite Islam – is the keyhole and resistance the key to unlock the door which would lead to a different, non-modern world. Opposing modernity has become a matter of faith against the forces of modernity.

Foucault describes how groups of unarmed demonstrators were halting government troops with shouts of 'Islam, Islam!' and 'Soldier, my brother, why shoot your brother? Come with us to save the Quran!' (Foucault 1978c:200). Foucault was at first surprised to find many – but not all – left-wing, even completely secularist students agitating for an 'Islamic government'. But then he observed that the Shi'ite clergy was completely different from the Catholic hierarchy. 'The Shi'ite clergy is not a revolutionary force' – they mediate and facilitate a 'sense of being-together for the Iranian people' (Foucault 1978c:202). The clergy had no popes or cardinals nor any centralised system of authority, and if the mullahs were stimulating a popular revolt against corruption, it was not because they were 'in command' but because they were giving ordinary Iranians exactly what they needed: 'A way of being together, a way of speaking and

listening, a means of understanding each other and sharing each other's desires' (Foucault 1978c:202).

These protesters who were calling for Islamic government explained themselves to Foucault by speaking about an 'ideal' fashioned from Islamic values as they understood them: the dignity of labour, respect for minorities, equality before the law and government accountable to the people – exactly those things promised but never realised by modernity in Iran (1978d:205). That ideal could transform thousands of forms of discontent, hatred, misery and despair into a force – it could transform them into a force 'because it is an elemental mode of social organisation, of being together, a way of speaking and listening, and being listened to' (Foucault 1978c:202). To listen and be listened to – that was what the Iranians were dreaming about. They dreamed about an Islamic government carrying that dream forward. In an interruption of his streak of articles for *Corriere della Sera*, Foucault published a long article in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in the 16–22 October edition of 1978, pondering on the Iranians' dream.

What are the Iranians dreaming about?

(Foucault 1978d:203–209)

Foucault was initially startled by their dream:

It is often said that definitions of an "Islamic government" are imprecise. To me, however, they seemed to have a clarity that was completely familiar and also, it must be said, far from reassuring ... (I told them) these are simply the catchphrases of democracy – of bourgeois or revolutionary democracy. We in the West have been repeating them to ourselves ever since the eighteenth century, and look where they have got us.

(Foucault 1978d:206)

But the protesters immediately replied: 'These catchphrases were part of the Quran long before your philosophers adopted them; in the industrialised Christian West they may have lost their meaning, but Islam is going to restore their value and their force' (Foucault 1978d:206). Foucault was initially not persuaded by their reflections on their dream, but as the Iranian students elaborated on their dreams of an Islamic government, it must have struck him that he was witnessing one of his 'present histories' in action; that he was witnessing a micro-process, a particularity, a dynamic reconfiguration of rigid subject and object relations, an outbreak of what he often referred to as political 'spirituality' (see footnote 3), similar to what swept through Europe centuries earlier: 'The mullah's shouted imprecations ... terrible as Savonarola's must have sounded in Florence, as the Anabaptists in Münster, or the Presbyterians in Cromwell's time' (Foucault 1978c:201; 1979c:186; see Eribon 1992:284).

It might not amount to a political program, but still it was impressive in its way: It impresses me as what you might call a "political will" ... It also impresses me as an attempt, in response to current problems, to politicise structures that are both social and religious. And it impresses me as an attempt to open up a spiritual dimension in politics.

(Foucault, cited in Rée 2005:46)

In this fourth article of 1978 Foucault worked with two opposing idea-types, that of the saint (Khomeini) and the king (the Shah). Foucault is moved by the difference in communication with the Iranian people between Khomeini (who is not there, who says nothing, who is not a politician [Foucault 1978h]) and the Shah (who is 'panoptically' there, who sees everything, who gives orders, who examines – who is a politician in the most modern sense of the word). How is it that one who is not there, who says nothing and who is not a politician could have such an enormous communicative ability and political effect? How does one communicate in silence, in exile? Khomeini, argues Foucault, communicates exactly by his silence, by his non-presence, by being 'non-political' (or not political in the modern sense). His silence is the symbol of the Iranians' own silence and his exile has become their own exile, in their own country. That

is why merely his name has become a 'rallying cry' (Foucault 1978d:204). Khomeini's 'saintliness' is to be found in the fibre of understatement embedded in the 'mysterious current between Khomeini and the people', which Foucault admitted he found 'intriguing' (Foucault 1978d:205). Western observers might have stated that the Iranians said 'what they did not want, but not what they wanted' (Foucault 1978d:204) – yet for Foucault, it was clear what they wanted. They wanted to mobilise their silence, stepping out of Khomeini's silence, to break their exile from the marginalised position of his exile (Foucault 1978d:204).

It is important to state that Foucault, however intrigued he was by the uprising events, was not mesmerised by Khomeini's image as 'the saint of the people'. He was actually very ironic about it, exactly because the horizontal organisation of Shi'ite clergy in his mind would not have allowed such a sanctification of one single 'super mullah', or a special breed of one of the '*ulamā*'. I find no adoration for Khomeini as a person in Foucault's articles. Exactly the opposite: Foucault found the effect of Khomeini's non-presence fascinating; it was Khomeini's silent, marginalised persona within a grand historical scheme of things that mattered. It was the lack of Khomeini's presence in the events that intrigued Foucault. Yet Foucault strikingly did refrain from criticising Khomeini – and the Khomeinism that would follow in 1979. Even in October 1978, at this still unstructured, volatile stage of the revolution, one would expect Foucault, from the background of his own theoretical writings on power, to have been much more weary and cautious of the potential of repression and obscurantism that Khomeini undoubtedly represented. The fact that Foucault met with Khomeini shortly after Khomeini arrived in Paris on 6 October – even though it was a meeting that one could describe only as brief, inconsequential and uninteresting, given the report of Eribon (1991:286) – did nothing to sensitise Foucault to what in hindsight was danger lurking in the shadows.

But again, what Foucault understood to be an Islamic government was closely knit with his understanding of Shi'ite Islam's non-hierarchical nature and the experience of Khomeini as non-visible and non-political in the modern sense, that Khomeini would be, as the mullahs already were, echoing the voices of and guiding the flock that was Iran. One could possibly refer to Foucault's perspective on the Iranian dream, besides his second take on it being as 'present-historical', which is a contra-modern notion, as 'pastoral' in the sense that he thought that the Islamic government would constitute a simple vocabulary, as simple as one would ordinarily find in pastoral relationships. Foucault understood the notion of Islamic government as a series of elementary, horizontal relationships:

One thing must be clear: By 'Islamic government' nobody in Iran means a political regime in which a cleric or the clerics would have a role of supervision or control. To me, 'Islamic government' (points) to two orders of things: An ideal, something very old yet very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam once was at the time of the Prophet ... but also that distant point where it would be possible to renew identity rather than maintain obedience ... a faith in the creativity of Islam seems to me to be essential.

(Foucault 1978d:206)

Foucault gave no indication, at any time, that he suspected that the Islamic government that came into being on 1 April 1979 would be so drastically different from this 'pastoral' understanding of an Islamic government. It would come back to haunt him.

The dynamics of Foucault's first trip in the second half of September, as reflected in the first four articles of September and October 1978 (Foucault 1978a–d), clearly centred around modern-critical notions, notions that were already established in many of his earlier works, from the early 1960s onwards. Foucault observed the events in Iran to be proof of the failure of the project of modernity, even in a context isolated geographically and socio-historically from the world of Enlightenment.



Foucault was not content merely with meeting politicians and leaders from the opposition. He spent the ten days in Iran speaking to students, people in the street, representatives of the Shah's army, and not least, the Islamic youth proclaiming that they were prepared to die (Foucault 1978a:190). He went around to the cemeteries, which were the only authorised places of meeting (Foucault 1978g:219). He went to the universities and the doors of the mosques: 'Foucault gathered information, listened, looked, always taking notes, walking everywhere – Voeltzel remember them as exhausting days' (Eribon 1992:284). Foucault asked the same question of everyone he met on the streets of Tehran: 'What do you want?' Invariably he got the same answer, an answer he considered to be a genuine modern-critical one and the basis of what I referred to as his 'pastoral' perspective on the resistance: 'An Islamic government' (Foucault 1978d:205; see Miller 1993:309).

A revolt with bare hands (Foucault 1978e:210–213)

Foucault went back to Paris in the last week of September 1978. In France, liberal commentators were struggling to come to grips with the unmodern nature of the events in Iran and to fit that wayward kind of non-political politics into the up-curved, teleological political narrative of modernity. Iran did not present the familiar lines of a struggle between 'pure-hearted youthful rebels and dark-souled reactionaries, and it was difficult to see it as another China, Cuba or Vietnam, or a second edition of Paris in 1968' (Rée 2005:46, see Foucault 1978e:211). These commentators nevertheless condemned Foucault's idea of 'political spirituality', which struck them as extremely anachronistic: 'I can hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong' (Foucault 1978d:209). He admitted that he knew very little about Iran ('let us admit that we Westerners would be in a poor position to give advice to the Iranians on this matter' [Foucault 1978e:213; cf. 1978h:220]). Yet he became convinced that the entire Iranian population was acting like a massive 'political hedgehog' with a single, seemingly contradictory passion: the desire for a process that would somehow 'prevent politics from gaining a foothold' (Foucault 1978e:210–211). Such a movement was clearly not sustainable, but that did not make it lamentable in Foucault's mind. The idea of an Islamic government would settle down eventually; it would prove to be either 'a reconciliation, a contradiction, or the threshold of something new' – but in the interim, it was impossible to tell.

In his fourth article for *Corriere della Sera*, published on 5 November 1978, just before he returned to Iran and at the time when the uprising was reaching its climax, Foucault described the energy of the resistance he had witnessed in the streets of Tehran on the basis of two paradoxes. The first paradox he notes is that the uprising against that mighty modern structure, the Iranian army and police force, was brought about without weapons. It was done with bare hands, never resorting to armed struggle. The courage and determination of the Iranian people brought about a dynamic which 'froze' the army and police:

Two months ago, the army killed four thousand in Djaleh Square. Yesterday, two hundred thousand people marched in front of soldiers, who did not react ... As the final crisis looms, recourse to violent repression seems less and less possible. The uprising of a whole society has choked off the possibility of civil war.

(Foucault 1978e:211)

The second paradox Foucault describes is that the revolt spread without splits or internal conflicts. The secularists at the universities could have attempted to destabilise the uprising by actively engaging their best students in the political arena. For whatever reason, it did not happen – possibly because some of them actively joined the uprising themselves while others simply wanted to stay out of the affair and carry on with their daily business of doing science, sustaining the industry of administered knowledge. The Shah's tactical release of more than a thousand political prisoners at the time could have brought the spontaneous eruption of the resistance into disarray. This too did

not happen – the released prisoners simply joined the uprising, without attempting to gain control over it or structure it. Not even the modern industrialised sector was able to destabilise its cohesion by offering pay raises to the demonstrators. The demonstrators were by all indications one and their revolt not for sale, not even by some of the largest petroleum companies in the world. In his fifth article (Foucault 1978f), Foucault challenged the government forces with these two paradoxes.

But Foucault chose not to linger with the natural dissidents of the revolution, those who opted to stay out of the uprising – the many secularists at the universities and the business people who wanted nothing to do with it, as well as the thousands of secular women, among them many scientists and academics, who suddenly had to don the veil, and, ironically, homosexuals. Yes, millions took part in the uprising, but millions preferred to stay out of it, too. There is in Foucault's articles no reference to their position. Again, this was an oversight that would come back to haunt him.

Yet one has to understand that Foucault was convinced that everyone would be accommodated in the new dispensation, whatever form that dispensation would take and however absent long-term objectives were in the vision of the protestors:

(He was assured that) ... with respect to liberties, they will be respected to the extent that their usage will not harm others; minorities will be protected and free to live as they please on the condition that they do not injure the majority; between men and women there will not be inequality with respect to rights, but difference, since there is a natural difference.

(Foucault 1978h:222)

(One might ask, alongside the exiled feminist 'Atoussa H' [1978:209], since when have minorities, outside clear and present terrorist contexts, harmed the majority?) Yet Foucault clearly never was under the impression that the secularists in general would literally be slaughtered in the new dispensation. Everyone he spoke to expected Khomeini to come back soon, but Foucault was assured that 'there will not be a Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government' (Foucault 1978h:222). What the protesters wanted was not even a revolution as Westerners understood it: 'Everybody is quite aware that they want something completely different', something the consequences of which would come as a surprise to modern political analysts. The only certainty was that the new revolt of Islam was 'irreducible' and unpredictable (Foucault 1978e:211).

The revolt in Iran spreads on cassette tapes (Foucault 1978g:216–220)

Foucault's sixth article was retrospectively published in *Corriere della Sera* on 19 November 1978, four days after he returned from his second visit to Iran. Once again he was impressed by the way the resistance was perpetuating itself, not through military strength, but through the power of information. Protests were sustained by a diffuse system of communication that the state could neither monitor nor control: Messages from unidentified sources were transmitted by telephone, by sermons and above all, by what was at the time the tool *par excellence* of counter-information: the audiocassette recorder, which we today would consider to be a very humble apparatus. 'If the Shah is about to fall, it will be due above all to the cassette tape' (Foucault 1978g:219). Foucault in this article appreciated, on a philosophical level, the spontaneous eruption of resistance to established power and the way a dissemination or rhizome of information assisted the momentum of the revolution. But there is more to it: again, as was the case with the army with all its modern weaponry which eventually would be the force of destruction in this modern state, the cassette tape is a product of modern industry, seemingly a modest product, yet used very effectively against the modern state.

What happened was that the military, in their numerous attempts to establish censorship and silence journalists, paved the way for an entire network of information, sustained by telephones and cassette tapes, a network people perfected over the course of 'years of obscurantism' (Foucault 1978g:219):

One can find, outside the doors of most provincial mosques, tapes of the most renowned orators at a very low price. One encounters children walking down the most crowded streets with tape recorders in their hands. They play these recorded voices from Qom, Mashhad and Isfahan so loudly that they drown out the sound of cars, passersby do not need to stop to be able to hear them ... that is why, from town to town, the strikes start, die out and start again.

(Foucault 1978g:219–220)

The mythical leader of the Iranian revolt (Foucault 1978h:220–223)

Khomeini is not there ... Khomeini says nothing ... Khomeini is not a politician ...

(Foucault 1978h:222)

Foucault's last noteworthy contribution in 1978 for *Corriere della Sera* was published on 26 November, at the time when the country was enveloped in a full-blown revolution, at the time it became undisputable that a semi-liberal government has changed into a fully-fledged military one, over a period of less than three months:

The whole country is now engulfed in revolt: the cities, the countryside, the religious centers, the oil regions, the bazaars, the universities, the civil servants, the intellectuals ... an entire century in Iran – one of so-called economic development and modernisation – is being put into question. It is being totally rejected.

(Foucault 1978h:220)

Now slowly emerging from the shadows of understatement was Khomeini, who the previous month left the Shi'ite holy city of Najaf in Iraq, arriving in Paris on 6 October to spend the last months of his 15-year exile in Europe, from early October 1978 to late January 1979. Foucault now describes Khomeini without any reserve as the 'leader' of this otherwise leaderless revolt and therefore an 'almost mythical' figure (Foucault 1978h:222). Although Foucault in his fourth article reflected on Khomeini's appeal and the way he evoked solidarity in the hearts of Iranians (Foucault 1978d:204–205, see the discussion in Section 4.4), this seventh article focused on Khomeini's progressive visibility and importance, not merely for the clergy, but for common Iranians as such:

I was impressed to hear a Boeing pilot say: 'You have now in France the most precious thing that Iran has possessed for the last century – Protect it'. His tone was commanding. I was even more impressed to hear strikers of Abadan say: 'We are not particularly religious'. I asked them: 'Who do you trust then? A political party?' 'No, no one' they answered. 'Only one, Khomeini, and he alone'. I was impressed by it.

(Foucault 1978g:218)

Today, no head of state, no political leader, even one supported by the whole media of his country, can boast of being the object of such a personal and intense attachment ... which is the result of three things: Khomeini is not there. For the last fifteen years, he has been living in exile and does not want to return until the Shah has left. Khomeini says nothing, nothing other than no ... (no) to the Shah, to the regime, to dependency. Finally, Khomeini is not a politician. There will not be a Khomeini party, there will not be a Khomeini government.

(Foucault 1978h:222)

In this excerpt I find Foucault philosophically to be at his most vulnerable over the course of the nine months during which his Iran writings came into being. Khomeini was sent into exile in June 1963, after he publicly compared the Shah to Yazid, the Umayyad caliph who ordered the murder of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet, calling the Shah a 'Jew'. His imprisonment, with some thirty other of the *ulamā*, already then caused large-

scale demonstrations, the subsequent repression resulting in at least a hundred deaths (Rodinson 1978:235). Though Khomeini was therefore not physically present in Iran since 1963, that which is now considered to be general knowledge for political researchers of Islam must be stated, namely that Khomeini was in effect 'governing' Iran from exile since at least the early 1970s (e.g. Momen 1987:246–299).

Actually, a subversive, underground, self-perpetuating network of resistance was put into place already at the time Khomeini was exiled in 1963, and it was carefully orchestrated from the outside by Khomeini as well as his many cadres,¹² who moved relatively freely between the domicile of his exile, Iraq, and the domicile of his power, Iran. The reality was that Khomeini was in a far more favourable political position on the outside than had he been on the inside. Had he been on the inside, he would simply have become 'the opposition', in terms of the binary logic and dynamics of modern politics. But being on the outside allowed Khomeini to oppose without in fact becoming 'the opposition'. The fact that Foucault did not encounter the phenomenon Khomeini on the streets of Tehran in 1978 – or that Khomeini actually was there, that Khomeini actually was politicising – but a 'noumenal reality', someone absent yet spookily present on those streets – or that Khomeini was not there, that Khomeini was not a politician – only serves as proof of how effective the subverted organisation of Khomeini's political profile really was, how sophisticated that network of 'cassette tapes' Foucault himself had witnessed and reported on, actually became. Foucault underestimated the complexity of the kind of politics Khomeini was practising, indeed from the outside, and he underestimated to what extent Khomeini himself, however untypical, became a modern politician while he was in exile; to what extent Khomeini himself 'observed, controlled, normalised and examined' the events in Iran.¹³

Why Foucault compromised the characteristic cynical nature of his views on the cunning ways people are 'governed' in the modern world¹⁴ at this late stage of his Iranian journey, is a mystery. How it was possible for him not to view Khomeini's non-presence as a form of political presence, how it was possible for him to maintain his views on Khomeini as a 'non-politician' and a rather 'mystical figure', is to me incomprehensible in the light of his crucial theoretical position regarding power as 'everywhere'. Had his own theories on 'governmentality' not taught exactly the opposite of what he stated about Khomeini not being there, about Khomeini being 'disengaged ... from external domination and internal politics' (Foucault 1978h:222)? If it is true that the 'phenomenon of the political influence of the Iranian *ulamā*, who constitute a sort of religious party, astonished everyone' (Rodinson 1978:233) why did it not astonish Foucault? Is it possibly because Khomeini had become for him the personification of Nietzsche's will to power, a ruthless historical figure with 'saintly self-mastery', the perfect example

12. These cadres included some prominent leftist intellectuals in Iran, who supported Khomeini to develop his blueprint for an Islamist revolution. Afary and Anderson (2005:59) indicated that Jalal Al-Hamad (1923–1969), author of the classic 1963 book, *Plagued by the West*, was the first leftist to join ranks with Khomeini, furthering the cause of the revolution that followed 15 years later.

13. None of the authoritative commentaries on the social and political developments toward the revolution I have studied would disagree with the political facts underlying that statement (see, in particular, Abrahamian (1982:496–530; 1993:60–87), Arjomand (1989:91–176), Esposito (2003:26–70), Hiro (2000:103–135), Kinzer (2003:119–133), Martin (2003:100–165), Milani (1994:59–104), Momen (1987:246–299) and Mortimer (1982: 296–376).

14. While it is true on the one hand that Foucault found the perfect context for illustrating his revolt against Western 'governmentality' in an actual revolution, that of the Iranians, one that seemed to despise modern Western 'governmentality' as much as he did, it now, in hindsight, seems possible and even likely on the other hand that he underestimated the way Western 'governmentality' was internalised by Khomeini himself. It should come as no surprise then that Lilla (2003:1–17, 137–158) is compelled to juxtapose Heidegger's position in 1933 and Foucault's position in late 1978 – asking both Heidegger and Foucault the same implicit question: How could you not have (fore)seen? I would maintain though that while Heidegger's loyalist position had no philosophical basis whatsoever, Foucault's critique of modernity provided a clear philosophical basis for his involvement in Iran. Yet I do acknowledge that he overburdened the critical mass of his own critique of modernity in the process.



of going beyond Nietzsche's 'ascetic (Christian) priest', as Afary and Anderson (2005:14, 36–37) suggest? Although I am sceptic of this somewhat affected, forced Nietzschean interpretation, I do concede that Foucault's reluctant, hesitant disposition toward Khomeini is, at least for those who attempt to interpret his life-work as meaningful, a cryptogram. Foucault himself stated that Khomeini says nothing except 'no' – how does a philosopher who is so exceptionally hermeneutical otherwise, accept that 'no' as unproblematic, as a given premise? How can the refusal to say 'yes' to anything, in principle, be philosophically excusable within any 'discursive practice', to use his own words?

It seems, as far as Khomeini's political position was concerned, that Foucault was severely mistaken. Even if he did not support 'Khomeini' but was only recording the resistance against the 'politics of the present', which the person Khomeini was part of, even if it is true that he would never have supported the developments in early 1979, Foucault's last article in 1978 for *Corriere della Sera* opened his back for the intense criticism he was subjected to in France and in the broader intellectual community in the years to come. Yet I maintain that Foucault never actually supported Khomeini, because the primary texts themselves do not support that conclusion. Being uncritical is something completely different from being subjective.

As indicated earlier, events in Iran got completely out of hand after the initial revolution in 1978. While there was from the outset outspoken resistance in France against the tone of Foucault's Iran writings, in its support for the revolting masses, his experiment in political journalism was now accepted with enormous hostility in the French press, and progressively so. Maxime Rodinson, a respected Marxist scholar of Islam at the time, informed Foucault in an extensive essay, published on the front page of *Le Monde* in the 6–8 December 1978 edition, that a cruel future awaited Iran and that an Islamic government was bound to implement some kind of archaic fascism:

[T]he scope of the meaning of a "Muslim government" is vast ... the term can cover different, even diametrically opposed, regimes. Governments can make mutual accusations of the betrayal of 'true' Islam. Nothing is easier or more dangerous than this time-honored custom of dubbing your adversary an "enemy of God" ... it is indeed unwise so many regimes have declared themselves Islamic ... it is quite possible that the men of (this) religion will present a rather more modern, concrete and persuasive form of Islam.

(Rodinson 1978:237–238)

This confirms the statement made above about Khomeini's political position being awkwardly modern. Later, Rodinson stated:

Foucault, this very great thinker, part of a line of radically dissident thought had enormous gaps in his knowledge of Islamic history that 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 the imagining of an end of history that would make up for disappointments in Europe and elsewhere ... at the very least, Foucault wanted to announce the introduction of satisfactory political and social measures towards his humanist ideal, due to the workings of (his notion of) "political spirituality" ... this notion 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.

(Rodinson 2005:274)

An exiled Iranian feminist pseudonymed 'Atoussa H' – to some extent the silent informant of Afary and Anderson's exhaustive study (2005) on Foucault in Iran – claimed that Foucault's self-centred (if not, implicitly, Orientalist) theoretical interest in his notion of 'political spirituality' was blinding him, like many other Westerners, to the inherent injustices of Islam, especially toward women ('Atoussa H' 1978:209; see Rodinson 1978:237):

I am profoundly upset by the untroubled attitude ... of some French leftists toward the possibility of an 'Islamic government' that might replace the bloody tyranny of the Shah ... Michel Foucault seems moved by the "Muslim spirituality" that would advantageously

replace, according to him, the ferocious capitalist dictatorship that is tottering today ... Spirituality? A return to deeply rooted wellsprings? Many Iranians like me are distressed and desperate about the thought of an "Islamic government". We know what it is ... simply the cover for feudal or pseudo-revolutionary oppression ... do not be seduced by a cure that is worse than the disease.

('Atoussa H' 1978:209)

Foucault's reaction was very hostile, arguing that 'Atoussa H' did 'not read the article', or if she did, simply merged together 'all the potentialities of Islam within a single expression of contempt' (Foucault 1978i:210). But history itself would slay those 'potentialities': the events in the first quarter of 1979 seemed to be vindicating Foucault's critics. As mentioned previously, the Shah fled Iran in the early weeks of 1979, Khomeini returned in triumph and the Islamic republic was ratified in a popular referendum on 1 April 1979. Now it became clear that the events in Iran constituted a classic case of reactionary authoritarian populism. Many of the possibilities that Foucault had argued for in his writings from September 1978 onward were coming to nothing – no transgression of the failure of Enlightenment, no uniqueness, no innovative reconfiguration of subject-object relations, no particularity, and especially, no surprises.

Even the prominent French leftists Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, for many years amongst Foucault's close allies in a wide spectrum of activist endeavours in France, finally called on him in a venomous article on the front page of *Le Matin*, on 24 March 1979, to 'confess his errors' (Broyelle & Broyelle 1979:249). The Broyelles were extremely hostile, their tirade representative of the viciousness Foucault had to bear toward the end of May 1979:

Today there are little girls all in black, veiled from head to toe; women stabbed precisely because they do not want to wear the veil, summary executions for homosexuality ... women merely suspected of adultery, flogged ... (Michel Foucault's) "Saint", "the destitute exile", "the man who rises up with bare hands", his "Ayatollah Khomeini" ruined it all. What form was this Islamic government supposed to have taken (according to Foucault)? "Absence of hierarchy in the clergy... the importance of purely spiritual authority ... the echoing and guiding role the clergy must play ... the Islamic fashion over and against the stupidity of Western democracies ... very old yet very far in the future ..." (What we see in Iran now are) spontaneous armed groups, or otherwise "benevolent" Islamic committees that "counterattack" and take immediate revenge – this is the people's justice for which Michel Foucault so passionately yearned ... This philosopher contents himself with painting and offering images, holy images: the abridged illustrated imam, sequel to the hurried marabout of "people's justice". This philosopher is no more responsible than Léon Daudet for the Holocaust, or than the Western communist intellectuals for the gulags ... When one is an intellectual, when one has the freedom – without having to fight at the risk of one's life in order to obtain it – not to be a sycophantic writer, then one has also some obligations. The first one is to take responsibility for the ideas one has defended when they are finally realised. This philosopher should say "Long live the Islamic government!" and it would be clear that he is going to the final extreme of his radicalism. Or he should say "No, I did not want that, I was mistaken – here is what was wrong with my reasoning, here is where my thinking is in error". He should reflect. After all, that is his job.

(Broyelle & Broyelle 1979:247–249)

No wonder Foucault was injured on a very deep level by this and similar other public outcries against his 'championing of the people's justice, of Khomeini's bloodshed'. He reacted swiftly the next day, his philosophical grace still intact:

I will not react to these accusations: I have never in "my life" taken part in polemics and I have no intention of beginning now. There is another reason why I will not react, based on principles. I am summoned to "acknowledge my errors". This expression and the practice it designates remind me of something and of many things, against which I have fought. I will not lend myself to a maneuver whose form and content I detest: You are going to confess, or you

will shout “Long live the assassins!”. I am anxious to debate the question of Iran – yet Blanchot teaches that criticism begins with attention, good demeanor and generosity.

(Foucault 1979c:249–250)

Indeed Foucault did attempt to further debate the ‘question of Iran’. In April 1979 Foucault published an open letter to the new Iranian Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* on 14 April 1979, expressing dismay at the violation of human rights under what was clearly now a ‘government of mullahs’. Foucault wrote two last articles for *Corriere della Sera* in April and May 1979, attempting to provide a sober overview of the stark developments in Iran (Foucault 1979a–b): Things indeed turned out for the worse in Iran, but that did not invalidate his remarks about how they might have been different; nor did it show that the events were not inherently modern-critical, with a capacity to ‘surprise the Western world’. During March, April and May 1979 Foucault was consistently on the defence, not yielding an inch to his critics in Paris. Despite their accusations, he was adamant that he had not advocated an Islamic government, but that he had simply recorded some of the aspirations of the protesters, while trying to use the events in Iran as a platform for an ongoing critique of modernity, in an attempt to dismantle the modernistic notions put forward by Western observers, in France, particularly: ‘The problem of Islam as a political force is an essential one for our time and for the years to come ... and we cannot approach it with a minimum of intelligence if we start out from a position of hatred’ (Foucault 1978i:210). During the middle of May 1979 Foucault started to withdraw from further public discussions surrounding the issue. He was appalled by many other imperious summonses to confess his ‘mistake’. He was surprised and wounded by the scorn of his critics, and at the end of May 1979 he retired from the conflict altogether. Foucault’s adventure as a controversial political journalist was now at an end. In the five years he had left, he never participated in extra-academic public discourses again – and he never referred publicly to Iran again (Afary & Anderson 2005:181; Eribon 1992:295).

TEN SUGGESTIONS

Against the backdrop of the discussion above, the following ten suggestions can be made based on the many excerpts from Foucault’s Iran writings, the non-polemic way these writings have been contextualised above, and the disputes that followed the publication of those writings:

1. At the centre of all considerations, Foucault explicitly supported the cause of the revolting masses in Iran in 1978 on modern-critical grounds. It has been shown clearly that Foucault viewed the events in the early stages of the Iranian revolution as inherently modern-critical in nature, and very perceptively so, in his conviction that these events could broaden and fortify the ongoing critique of modernity in Europe itself. He totally went against the grain of the conventional European perspective on the revolution, which considered the revolution to be simply regressive. The majority of his reports for *Corriere della Sera* in 1978, of which numerous paragraphs have been cited and discussed above, are quite obviously closely related to his general theoretical writings on the discourses of power and the inherent risks of modernity. It is clear that these writings are stylistically unique – they certainly are not philosophical essays; yet, by their clear and decisive modern-critical claims, they are philosophical contributions to his oeuvre in particular and his critique of the project of modernity in general.

2. Foucault clearly did not foresee nor did he endorse Khomeini’s understanding and implementation of what an ‘Islamic republic’ should be. What Foucault understood to be an Islamic government corresponded with what he got to know as the ‘Iranian dream’, closely knit with his understanding of Shi’ite Islam’s non-hierarchical nature and his perspective on Khomeini as a non-political figure in the modern sense. He was convinced that the new dispensation would be anti-hierarchical along the lines of horizontal clergy organisation in Shi’ite Islam

– in hindsight this conviction was naive and even misplaced.

3. Foucault was justifiably being held accountable by his critics in France for a naive perspective on the vicious potential embedded in any religious fundamentalism. He indeed misread the developments from February 1979 onward and did not foresee the bloodshed that would follow. Yet it is neither reasonable nor responsible to accuse Foucault of endorsing Khomeini and his version of an Islamic republic. While his texts clearly support Foucault’s endorsement of the actual revolution, the texts do not support the notion of Foucault’s championing Khomeini as a ‘politician’ nor did he at any point endorse Khomeini’s bloodthirsty regime.

4. Foucault had no clear objectives for his journalistic expedition. In fact, he was to an extent unsure of what to make of it and opted to utilise the events as an opportunity to write a history of the present, as history-as-it-unfolds. He was critically aware of the fact that he had no clear philosophical objective, in the conventional sense. Philosophically, he was out of place and uncomfortable. Yet his uncertainty could be interpreted as meaningful in that ‘other’ context.

5. Foucault appreciated, on a philosophical level, the spontaneous eruption of resistance to established power and the way a dissemination or rhizome of information assisted the momentum of the revolution.

6. Foucault was fascinated by the violent confrontation with identity he witnessed in the streets of Tehran, and the irrationality unleashed by people willing to risk death for something the outcome of which they themselves did not yet understand.

7. Foucault was intrigued by the possibility of a political alternative, the possibility of an event that was absolutely other to liberal democracy. He was intrigued by the nature of the ‘political spirituality’ that he was convinced was sustaining this alternative – that the revolution indicated that it could be possible for a radical new set of subject-object relations to be formed, precisely from within a modernised context.

8. Foucault, by initially furthering what he considered to be the fundamental cause and objective of the revolution – getting rid of what was modern in Iran – and in his conviction that secularists would not be marginalised in the new dispensation, compromised his philosophical position by not engaging the legitimate critique of subjects who were systematically crushed as the revolution unfolded: women, homosexuals and political dissidents (steadfast secular Iranians) in particular.

9. Foucault completely underestimated the hostility with which his reports would be received, in France in particular – initially not reacting to his critics at all, then being completely defensive, eventually withdrawing from the circle of interpretation altogether.

10. Foucault’s journalistic expedition harmed his reputation as probably the most famous intellectual in Europe in the 1970s and isolated him, to a very large extent, from the European intellectual community and Western liberal tradition, where he was previously adored. It scarred him on a personal level, as the *hamartian* eulogies at his funeral confirmed (see Eribon 1992:289; Macey 2004:128).

Is this now the end of the line for our understanding of Foucault in Iran? How can we further interpret the factuality of these ten suggestions – even if they stand undisputed, what can we do with their status as given? Can we work with them as premises for deepening our understanding? What are these suggestions not stating, what are the deeper nuances we should take to heart and come to grips with? What is the philosophical potential engraved on both sides of the coin – Foucault’s perceptiveness about some of the events in Iran, as well as his naïveté about



some of those events? In the follow-up article, I will attempt to move closer to a nuanced interpretation of both sides of that coin, attempting to understand Foucault's *hamartia*. I will do so by initially discussing three solid contributions in Foucault scholarship that dealt with this issue over the past five years, holding them close to these ten suggestions, which I will use as premises for my analysis, eventually moving towards a rehabilitation, via the notion of an 'ethics of Self-discomfort', of some of the philosophical grace of Michel Foucault before, during and after the events of September 1978 to April 1979 in Iran.

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15. Almost all of Foucault's shorter writings and published interviews have been published by Gallimard (in French) in a collection called *Dits et écrits*, originally published in four volumes in 1994, later published in only two volumes. In English there are a number of overlapping anthologies, which often use conflicting translations of the overlapping pieces, frequently with different titles. (Richard Lynch's bibliography of Foucault's shorter works has become invaluable for scholars in keeping track of these multiple versions in English and synchronising the page numbers of the texts in French and English. The Lynch bibliography can be accessed at <http://www.foucault.qut.edu.au/lynch.html>). *Dits et écrits* therefore came out in two versions: an initial four-volume set and a later two-volume set. The initial version is no longer in print. The page numbers of the two editions do not match. The solution is to always give the DE page number which remains consistent between the two-volume and four-volume versions. The official multilingual website by Centre Michel Foucault (<http://www.michel-foucault-archives.org/>) has produced a page concordance for converting the sets and a formula for working out the page numbers of one edition to the other. *The Roman numerals represent the four-volume edition and the Arabic ones the two-volume edition: DE I + 28 = DE I DE II + 868 = DE I DE III = DE II DE IV + 819 = DE II*. For a broader explanation, visit <http://www.foucault.info/Foucault-LI/archive/msg10471.html>. Foucault's Iran writings from September 1978 to February 1979 was translated into Persian and published in 1998 (Foucault 1998). I am heavily indebted to Karen de Bruin, Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson's English translations of the relevant French texts and used their translations in correspondence to the relevant passages in DE III as *per supra* concordance, as well as the older translations by Betsy Wing in Eribon (1992), and James Miller's (1993) and Jonathan Rée's (2005) own translations. Wherever I was quoting Foucault directly in this article, I did so on the basis of these translations by De Bruin, Afary and Anderson, as well as those by Miller, Rée and Wing, as indicated by reference.