Foucault Studies

ARTICLE

Foucault, the Iranian Uprising and the Constitution of a Collective Subjectivity

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As is well known, Foucault went to Iran twice in 1978 (on 16–24 September and 9–15 November) as a special correspondent of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, writing a series of short articles that were immediately translated and published in Italian in the form of a reportage.[1] Only a few texts on the Iranian uprising actually appeared in French in those months, and from the summer of 1979 till his death, five years later, Foucault chose not to refer publicly to Iran anymore. His stances on this subject gave rise to numerous misunderstandings and to some violent critiques, especially in France. Foucault indirectly responded to them through his article "Inutile de se soulever?", published in *Le Monde* in May 1979,[2] but eventually decided to keep silent, maybe because he did not want to get involved in political controversies with people who—as he said—were "fabricating things about my own texts and then attributing that to me".[3] However, in August 1979, Foucault conceded a long and incredibly rich interview to a young Lebanese philosopher, Farès Sassine, giving him permission to translate it in Arabic for the weekly *An Nahar al'arabî wa addûwalî*[4]. This interview was

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[1] Michel Foucault, "Les 'reportages' d'idées" [1978], in *Dits et écrits 2: 1976–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (2001), 706–707.

[2] Michel Foucault, "Is It Useless to Revolt?" [1979], *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islam*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson (2005), 263–267.

[3] Farés Sassine, "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings" [1979/2013], *Foucault Studies* 25 (2018), 329.

[4] On the circumstances of this interview, see Farès Sassine, "Foucault en l'entretien" [1979], *Rodéo* 2 (2013) and Jacob Hamburger, "Introduction – Farés Sassine," *Foucault Studies* 25 (2018), 318-322.

unavailable in its complete and original French version until the journal *Rodéo* finally published a full transcription of it in 2013.

PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNALISM

Why did Foucault become interested in the Iranian uprising and decide to go there and write a series of newspaper articles in the first place? The answer to this question is complex and multifaceted. There were of course 'material' conditions that made it possible: the Italian publisher Rizzoli had proposed him a regular collaboration with *Corriere della Sera* in the form of 'points of view'. Foucault accepted and started a project aiming at constituting a 'team' of intellectuals-reporters whose task was to "witness the birth of ideas and the explosion of their force" everywhere in the world, "in the struggles one fights for ideas, against them or in favor of them".[5] Foucault's reportage on the Iranian uprising was the first which was realized; only two other reportages followed—Alain Finkielkraut's reportage on the United States under the Carter administration and André Glucksmann's reportage on the boat people.[6] No doubt there was also a more or less fortuitous or accidental reason: as Foucault explains at the beginning of his interview with Sassine, when the news about a mass uprising taking place in Iran began to be reported, he was under the impression of his recent reading of Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*.[7] So, he decided to go there and see what was happening as a way to 'test' Bloch's theses about the relationship between political revolution and religious eschatology.[8] However, those material conditions and contingent reasons should not prevent us from trying to grasp the more general framework within which Foucault's decision to go to Iran and write a reportage on the uprising taking place there can be inscribed.

In the beginning of the 1970s, Foucault had already presented his work and the work of philosophy in general—or better of philosophy as he wanted to practice it—as a 'radical journalism': "I consider myself a journalist", he wrote in 1973, "to the extent that what interests me is the *actualité*, what is happening around us, what we are, what is going on in the world". According to Foucault, Nietzsche had been the first 'philosopher-journalist', that is to say, the first who introduced the fundamental question about today (*aujourd'hui*) into the field of philosophy.[9] In January 1978, a few months before his reportage on the Iranian uprising, Foucault again evoked the idea of philosophy as a form of journalism, liking it this time to Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant's texts on the *Aufklärung*, published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1784: these texts, according to him, inaugurate a "philosophical journalism" whose task

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[5] Foucault, "Les 'reportages' d'idées", 706–707.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* [1954–1959] (1986).

[8] Sassine, "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 323-325.

[9] Michel Foucault, "Le monde est un grand asile" [1973], in *Dits et écrits 1: 1954–1975*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, (2001), 1302.

is to analyze the "present moment".[10] He referred again to the same idea in May 1978, in his conference "What Is Critique?",[11] as well as in April 1979, in a short article published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*.[12] It is thus possible to suggest that Foucault's willingness to go to Iran and see what was happening there was a way, for him, to *put into practice*—in the most concrete sense of the word—the task of a philosophical journalism which tries to think of the present, the 'today', highlighting both the difference it introduces in relation to the past and the way in which it contributes to redefine our perception of ourselves as part of this *actualité*. After all, Foucault never ceased to present the work of philosophy in these terms: indeed, the concept of 'historical ontology of ourselves' that he elaborates in a series of lectures and articles at the end of his life is precisely for him a way of dealing with a series of questions — "What is our *actualité*? What are we as part of this *actualité*? What is the target of our activity of philosophizing insofar as we are part of our *actualité*?"[13]—which for sure Foucault already wanted to deal with in his reportage on the Iranian uprising.

However, if it is possible to observe a continual 'resurgence' of these theses in Foucault's work, at least from the beginning of the 1970s until his death, it is worth noting that he completely abandoned the expression 'philosophical journalism' very soon after his reportage on Iran: we do not find any reference to journalism in his lectures and texts after 1979.[14] At the same time, Foucault did not carry on his collaboration with *Corriere della Sera*: his reportage on the Iranian uprising was his first and last experience as a 'philosopher-journalist' in the strictest sense of the term. And, it is not so implausible that the unpleasant controversies that followed this experience, above all in France, along with the outcome of the Iranian revolution, contributed in a decisive manner to this decision—which nevertheless should not be interpreted as a 'retreat' from contemporary political issues,[15] nor as a symptom of a more or less significant transformation of his conception of the task of philosophy.

RELIGIOUS ESCHATOLOGY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUBJECTIVATION

What about the Iranian uprising *specifically*? Why was Foucault so interested in it? The interview with Sassine gives us some precious clues in order to answer to this difficult question. Foucault claims that the Iranian uprising stood out and was particularly

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[10] Michel Foucault, "Introduction" [1978], in Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (1991), 9–10.

[11] Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?" [1978], in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (2007), 48.

[12] Michel Foucault, "For an Ethic of Discomfort" [1979], in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. James D. Faubion (2001), 443.

[13] See also Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" [1983], in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (1984), 45–50; Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros (2010), 20–21.

[14] Daniele Lorenzini and Arnold I. Davidson, "Introduction," in Michel Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que la critique? Suivi de La culture de soi*, ed. Henri- Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (2015), 13–14.

[15] See, for instance, Foucault's public stances on the reform of the French penal system or the Polish crisis at the beginning of the 1980s.

significant for him not only because he wanted to use it as a sort of 'test' for Bloch's theses about the relationship between political revolution and religious eschatology, but also, and even more importantly, because it was neither "governed by a Western revolutionary ideology" nor directed by political parties or organizations.[16] This was exactly what Foucault was looking for: a mass uprising where people stand up against a whole system of power without being inscribed in a (Western) revolutionary framework. Indeed, in his works of the 1970s, Foucault tried to conceive of the possibility to think of resistance outside the traditional paradigm of revolution;[17] in the Iranian uprising, then, he was precisely hoping to find a concrete instance of such a new way of thinking of resistance.

In his interview with Sassine, Foucault describes the Iranian uprising in terms that are clearly borrowed from the theoretical framework he depicted a year before in *Security, Territory, Population* and in "What Is Critique?". It was—or at any rate it (initially) seemed to Foucault that it was—a "broadly popular" movement which owed its force to "a will at once both political and religious", constituted by people who were not revolting because they were "forced or constrained by someone", but because they *themselves* "no longer wanted to put up with the regime": "Collectively, people wanted no more of it".[18] Borrowing a concept he introduced in *Security, Territory, Population*, we could say that Foucault was describing the Iranian uprising as a contemporary form of "counter-conduct"[19] or—to refer to "What Is Critique?"—as a contemporary embodiment of the "critical attitude", that is, the will not to be governed or conducted "thusly, like that, by these people, at this price".[20] However, in the Iranian uprising, Foucault recognizes not only a form of 'negative' resistance (the fact of saying 'no' to power and oppression) but also a 'positive' or 'constructive' one. Indeed, according to him, the Iranian people did not simply want to end up with the way in which they were conducted by the existing political regime: they also wanted "something else" which was not another political regime but "a sort of religious eschatology"—a "non-political form of coexistence, a way of living together" that didn't follow the Western model. This was what, according to Foucault, gave form and force to their will, not to be governed like that anymore,[21] and this is what ultimately interested him as a philosopher who was trying, in his own work, to redefine both power and resistance in a radically new way.

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[16] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 324.

[17] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1978), 95–96 and Michel Foucault, "La philosophie analytique de la politique" [1978], in *Dits et écrits 2*, 546–547.

[18] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 327. See also Michel Foucault, "The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt" [1978], in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 221; Michel Foucault, "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit" [1979], in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 252–253.

[19] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed. Michel Senellart (2007), 201.

[20] Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?", 75.

[21] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 326-327. It is worth observing that in the 5 April 1978 lecture of *Security, Territory, Population*, speaking about some modern forms of counter-conduct, Foucault refers to what he calls "revolutionary eschatology", that is, "the affirmation of an eschatology in which civil

But through which lenses did Foucault look at Iran in order to test Bloch's theses and interpret the uprising as an experience which radically diverged from the Western model of revolution? Some of the books that Foucault read during those months had a significant influence on him and can therefore shed some light on the economic, social, political and religious aspects he decided to focus on in his two trips to Iran and his numerous meetings with the opponents to the Shah. Nevertheless, Foucault's stances on Iran cannot be simply reduced to the ideas expressed in those books. For instance, it is plain that Paul Vieille's works were crucial for Foucault: Vieille was among the first French sociologists who specialized in contemporary Iran, its social history and its class composition, in order to criticize—from a Marxist perspective—the role American imperialism was playing in the managing of oil resources and in the resulting strategies of modernization of the country.[22] However, as the interview with Sassine clearly shows, Foucault was not willing to explain the Iranian events through a Marxist schema: indeed, he repeatedly insisted on the absence of a class conflict and of a revolutionary vanguard playing the role of a '*fer de lance*' capable of carrying the whole nation with it.[23]

In order to understand Foucault's inscription of religious eschatology in the field of politics, his reading of Henry Corbin's works on esotericism and the phenomenology of the Shiite conscience turns out to be fundamental.[24] There Foucault found the description and analysis of a relationship between subjectivity and truth that radically diverged from the Western one. In Shiism, indeed, truth is the expression of a 'celestial' meta-history (the '*Hiérohistoire*'), irreducible to the political history, whose realization depends on messianic events and which takes place mainly in the religious and spiritual conscience: the *Hiérohistoire* develops in the world of the soul, seen as an 'intermediary' between the transcendent world of the intellect and the material world, and the external events are considered as a consequence of it.[25] But if this dualistic perspective led Corbin to the thesis of the 'autonomy' of the sphere of the Shiite subjectivity and its modes of conscience, that is, of the separation between the esoteric-spiritual dimension and the historico-political one, Foucault's views were different. In Corbin, the spiritual experience is externalized through a disjunction with the political history; on the contrary, in speaking of 'political spirituality', Foucault was trying to understand how the spiritual experience and its link to "a timeless drama in which power is always accursed" inscribes, in the individual and collective experience, a truth that corresponds to the will not to obey anymore. It is precisely this truth that, taking the form of an

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society will prevail over the state", as well as to an eschatology "that will take the form of the absolute right to revolt, to insurrection, and to breaking all the bonds of obedience" (Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 356).

[22] Paul Vielle and Abol Hassan Banisadr, *Pétrole et violence: Terreur blanche et résistance en Iran* (1974) and Paul Vielle, *La féodalité et l'État en Iran* (1975).

[23] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 325-327. See also Foucault, "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit", 251.

[24] Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (1964) and *Un Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (1971–1973).

[25] Christian Jambet, "Constitution du sujet et pratique spirituelle", in *Michel Foucault philosophe: Rencontre internationale, Paris 9, 10, 11 janvier 1988* (1989).

uprising, "interrupts the unfolding of history, and its long series of reasons why for a man 'really' to prefer the risk of death over the certainty of having to obey".[26]

However, the esoteric and spiritual trend of Shiism that Corbin referred to, and from which, according to Foucault, the uprising drew its energies, had become quite marginal. At that time, the connection between the religious experience of Shiism and the Iranian political situation was enacted by the figure of the Ayatollah: the religious experience of the Shiite popular masses essentially depended on this mediation. Foucault was not capable of recognizing this phenomenon, and for this reason he has been severely criticized: the temporal power that the Iranian clergy was seeking clearly diverged from the spiritual needs of the Shiite exotericism. Thus, Foucault has been (implicitly and explicitly) accused of a certain orientalism—an orientalism that considered the East as a reservoir of spirituality for a West desperately seeking new values and energies. This may seem quite strange since, as the interview with Sassine attests, Foucault knew Edward Said's *Orientalism* ("a really interesting book"), which deals extensively with such problems.[27] However, Foucault's texts on the Iranian uprising also manifest a sharp awareness of the need to (re)think, within an extra-European present, the complex articulation of religion and politics—where politics is not conceived in opposition to spirituality, but as a way to access a spiritual experience capable of criticizing the established political order. This is why, for Foucault, 'spirituality' was not a simple ideological covering. On the contrary, it was an attitude capable of producing concrete effects, namely a series of practices that articulate the relationship one has with oneself and the relationship one has with others, thus giving birth to a collective subjectivity and to the uprising against an oppressive power.

In his interview with Sassine, Foucault also discusses the value he attributes to rights, and more precisely to human rights. His critiques of this notion are well known. However, it is at the same time important to highlight the difference between human rights and rights in general and to observe that while Foucault critically addressed rights—and rights claims—in many occurrences, he referred to human rights only sporadically. Foucault's criticism of rights should be situated within his broader considerations about law and the judicial system in relation to power on the one hand and to struggles on the other. In the interview "On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists", Foucault explains that far from representing a mechanism which protects the subjects from state violations or a neutral institution granting the respect of rights, the judicial system is a constitutive mechanism of the state apparatus; and political struggles having historically unsettled the legitimacy of power can be defined, according to Foucault, as "anti-judicial".[28] Foucault's reluctance *vis-à-vis* justice-based claims depend

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[26] Foucault, "Is It Useless to Revolt?", 263–264.

[27] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 329. See Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (1978). On the encounter between Foucault and Said, which took place in Foucault's apartment during a seminar on the Arab-Israeli conflict organized by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in spring 1979, see Edward Said, "Diary: An Encounter with J.-P. Sartre", *London Review of Books* 22 (2000).

[28] Michel Foucault, "On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists" [1972], in *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (1980), 18.

also on the putative universality of the very norm of justice that he deeply challenges. Yet, Foucault has never dismissed struggles for rights as such; rather, and especially in the 1980s, he sees in those struggles a first and fundamental step towards a radical transformation of social and power relations and the creation of new ways of living. He stresses this point in some interviews about the gay movement in California, marking the difference between the existing codified law and the invention of a new right, and arguing that we should "imagine and create a new relational right that permits all possible types of relations to exist and not be prevented".[29] Instead, if one contains struggles within the frame of right claims, the risk is a re-codification of those movements into the language and inside the normative borders of the existing power relations. Further, the political stake of many struggles cannot be obtained (only) through claims, or, to put it differently, it is not something that can be 'claimed': it is rather something that should be *produced* as new social relations and modes of life. The target of political struggles is, in Foucault's view, very often something that cannot be taken as already existing—like a property in the hands of a few—but something that stems out from the struggle itself and whose illegitimacy reflects precisely its irreducibility to the laws in place. Thus, it seems that Foucault's criticism of rights cannot be detached from his critique of the 'claim paradigm', that is, the fact of assuming claims as the fundamental, unquestioned and unavoidable modalities of a struggle that, ultimately, does not disrupt the existing relationship between state institutions and subjects who address or contest them.

In the interview with Sassine, human rights are treated in a more positive sense. Foucault starts from a thesis which, in the analyses he developed a few months before in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, constituted the very heart of his study of liberalism:[30] states, and governmental mechanisms in general, always have "a tendency to govern too much"—there is "a law of excess interior to the development of power". It is therefore important to oppose such a tendency on the side of those who govern a series of "general limits not to be crossed", as an always provisory and fragile "guarantee of a non-excess".[31] This was quite precisely the project of political liberalism, and no doubt Foucault saw in it one of its greatest merits.[32] In the interview with Sassine, he presents human rights as one of the historical forms that such a principle of limitation of governmental power has taken. Thus, Foucault does not contradict his own claims. On the contrary, he argues very clearly that "there are no universal rights" but that, at the same time, it is "a universal fact that there are rights" and "that there must be rights", for "if we don't oppose a right to the fact of government, if we don't oppose a right to the mechanisms

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[29] Michel Foucault, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will" [1981/1982], in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 158.

[30] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart (2008), 19–20 and *passim*.

[31] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 338–339.

[32] Frédéric Gros, Daniele Lorenzini, Ariane Revel and Arianna Sforzini, "Introduction : Les néolibéralismes de Michel Foucault", *Raisons politiques* 52 (2013), 6–8.

and apparatuses of power, then they cannot but get carried away, they will never restrain themselves".[33]

This could sound quite surprising, but we should not overestimate such claims. Foucault here is doing nothing but elaborating upon his analysis of liberalism as a kind of "critical governmental reason" characterized by a principle of "self-limitation" and centered on the problem of "how not to govern too much".[34] Human rights are nothing more (but nothing less) than one of the tools that has been historically forged in response to such a problematization—a *critical tool* whose aim is to "mark out for a government its limit". This does not mean, however, that claiming the respect of human rights is *always* a politically effective strategy, nor that, in order to resist the excesses of power, they constitute our sole resource. Besides, Foucault immediately points out that human rights are not a necessary consequence of a supposedly universal human nature, nor are they the product of reason; instead, according to him, they are the historical product of *the will*—a notion that he puts here at the heart of his description of power relations and resistance, thus giving a more precise content to the vague remark he made during the discussion that followed his lecture "What Is Critique?".[35] Therefore, it is neither the freedom nor the autonomy of the individual which is placed at the beginning, but rather their will—namely, their will *not to be governed like that*.

Foucault's reflections on the (essentially historical and strategic) value of human rights is thus the occasion for an implicit but very sharp critique of the traditional picture of the individual as an autonomous rational agent. It is also the occasion for a radical critique of the humanistic image of man. Indeed, through the redefinition of the concept of the will—which, for him, is not a metaphysical, naturalistic or juridical notion, but an *ethico-political* one—Foucault clearly reaffirms the inexistence of a universal human nature and already points to what, in the 1980s, he will eventually call 'processes of subjectivation'. In his interview with Sassine, on the one hand, Foucault explicitly criticizes the "trans-historical or sub-historical or meta-historical permanence of man" along with the "universalism" that supports the traditional Western revolutionary discourse;[36] on the other, he develops an important redefinition of the notions of the subject and the will. These notions are, according to him, *reciprocal*: the subject is "what is set and determined by an act of will", and the will is "what sets for a subject his or her own position". But what Foucault is interested in is not *every* kind of subject nor *every* form of the will: what he is trying to analyze—and what he thought it was possible to find in the Iranian uprising—is a specific form of the will that, "beyond every calculation of interest and beyond the immediacy of desire", makes one say, "I prefer to die" rather than live in such a way.[37]

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[33] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 339. See also Foucault, "Is It Useless to Revolt?", 266–267.

[34] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 13.

[35] Foucault, "What Is Critique?", 76.

[36] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 341–342.

[37] Ibid., 340.

This peculiar form of the will, which adds "the test [*épreuve*] of death" to the will not to be governed like that,[38] constitutes a kind of *resisting subjectivity* that points right to Foucault's later analyses of the parrhesiast as a courageous individual who accepts the risk of death in order to tell the truth.[39] If the subject is not given, but created by an act of the will, then what Foucault is (implicitly but very clearly) suggesting here is that we should consider the Iranian uprising—and actually *every* uprising, that is to say, every manifestation of the will not to be governed like that—not only as a fight against *subjection* but also, and at the same time, as a process of (positively) constituting subjectivity: a process of *subjectivation*. At the same time, risking one's own life in order to fight subjection implies, according to Foucault, a *rupture* with respect to "every habit, familiarity, calculation, acceptance, etc. that makes up the web of daily existence". Hence, the very gesture of rising up is *irreducible* to the historical, economic or sociological context in which it emerged; this is not to say that uprisings are "outside of history", but rather that historical reasons and conditions 'never account entirely' for them—or, in other words, that an uprising is an *event*.[40]

Thus, it seemed crucial to Foucault to observe and try to understand the Iranian uprising in order to investigate (as he suggested in May 1978) "what the will not to be governed thusly, like that, etc., might be both as an individual and a collective experience",[41] or, more precisely, to analyze the constitution of a collective subjectivity— "an entire people was standing up".

POLITICAL SPIRITUALITY, POWER AND THE INTELLECTUAL

Foucault has been accused of not having foreseen the outcome of the Iranian revolution, or, worse, for not having understood that *since the beginning* the uprising was controlled by the mullahs and aimed at the institution of a theocratic Republic which will eventually ban opposing political parties, shut down newspapers and magazines, purge universities and summarily execute opponents, or—still worse—for having perfectly understood that and nonetheless supported the uprising. The first allegation is misplaced, and the second and third are simply false, based on textual evidence. Indeed, Foucault was conscious of "the risk" for the uprising to end up "in a government in the hands of the mullahs"; however, according to him, this was not a necessary outcome, since the 'Islamic government' everybody was talking about in those months (end of 1978–beginning of 1979) was not so much a precise political project than a term used to describe the effort to find "forms of coexistence, forms of social existence, forms of

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros (2010); Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros (2011); Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité: Précédé de La parrêsia* [1982], ed. Henri- Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (2016).

[40] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 335. See also Foucault, "Is It Useless to Revolt?", 263–264.

[41] Foucault, "What Is Critique?", 76.

equality, etc. that didn't follow the Western model".[42] And, this was precisely what interested and fascinated Foucault in the first place. Besides, in a famous interview in 1984, without referring to the Iranian uprising, Foucault elaborated upon a conceptual distinction that was already (at least implicitly) present in his texts on Iran: 'processes of liberation' are crucial, of course, but they are not in themselves "sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society".[43]

How about the 'support' that Foucault is said to have given, in a quite unconditional form, to the Iranian revolution? Once again, the interview with Sassine offers us many interesting elements in order to make things clearer. Foucault explicitly admits he was sympathetic with the uprising, but at the same time he explains the reasons for this sympathy and specifies that it "never went so far as to say that, one, we should imitate all that and, two, that what was going to come out of it would be paradise on earth". The way Foucault accounts for his sympathy for the uprising is apparently simple: "Given what the Shah's regime was, its political and economic oppression, its exploitation of the population and its masked imperialism, etc.—well, that an entire people should revolt against this regime is a good thing". And, he goes on arguing that it was thanks to Islam that 'the people as a whole participated actively' in this uprising, "recognized themselves in it", whereas "if the movement had been made in the name of the class struggle, or in the name of freedoms, I'm not sure if it would have had the same echo or the same force".[44] It is in this sense that Foucault had spoken of the search of a 'political spirituality',[45] and it is in this sense that, in his interview with Sassine, he draws an analogy with Calvinism as a movement that, in the West, tried to convey an entire form of spirituality into politics; but Foucault was not at all trying to suggest that political spirituality could be "a possible or desirable answer or aspiration in the West", nor was he claiming that political spirituality could be "the solution, even to the problems of Iran".[46]

It was, then, because of the revolt against an oppressive regime *as such*, and because he wanted to better understand the intertwining between politics and religion (or 'spirituality') in it[47]—and not for 'ideological' or 'political' reasons—that Foucault was sympathetic with the Iranian uprising. This has essentially to do with his way to conceive of relations of power as well as the task of the intellectual. Indeed, since a relation of power is always a *dynamic* relation, "there isn't power on the one hand and

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[42] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 328. See also "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit", 260.

[43] Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom" [1984], in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 282–283.

[44]"There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 331. See also "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit", 255.

[45] Michel Foucault, "What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?" [1978], in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 209.

[46] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 330.

[47] See *infra*, 330: "I don't believe you can ever understand something well if you're hostile to it".

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then the people to whom power is applied on the other": power is neither all powerful nor totally powerless—and this is why, in every society, there are both phenomena of subjection, through which individuals accept (and are constituted through) a series of mechanisms of domination, and moments of rupture where "the entire network of power is upset".[48] As a consequence, according to Foucault, "the intellectual doesn't have to be the legislator or to make laws or to say what's going to happen": he or she rather has "to show, perpetually, how what seems to go without saying in what makes up our daily life is in fact arbitrary and fragile, and that we can always rise up, and that there are always and everywhere reasons not to accept reality as it's given and proposed to us".[49]

It is precisely because there can't be societies without power relations[50] that there can't be, "and we shouldn't wish there to be",[51] societies without uprisings. But it is *up to us* to invent and reinvent *indefinitely* what we can and will rise up against and what we will direct our uprising towards:

> The good comes from innovation. The good does not exist, just like that, in a timeless heaven, with people who would be like astrologers of the good, able to determine the favorable conjunction of the stars. The good is defined, practiced, invented. But it requires the work not just of some, [but] a collective work.[52]

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[48] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 338.
[49] Ibid., 343. See also Foucault, Michel, "What Is Enlightenment?", 45–46.
[50] Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom", 298.
[51] "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings", 344.
[52] Michel Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (2015), 138.

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