

## TRANSLATION

## INTRODUCTION

FARÈS SASSINE

Translation by Jacob Hamburger

When I wrote to Michel Foucault in the early summer of 1979 to ask him for an interview for the Arab-language weekly *An Nahar al'arabî wa addûwalî*—a paper that appeared in Paris, and that sought to free Beirut's main daily *An Nahar* from the heavy Syrian presence in the Lebanese capital—he was in no hurry to respond. Though his recent positions on the Iranian uprising were still making waves in Parisian circles and beyond, he felt he had had his final word on the topic some months before.<sup>1</sup> He had also recently recovered from an illness and was still often tired, as he repeatedly informed me during our interview.<sup>2</sup> It was only the intervention of a mutual friend, Mahmoud Hussein,<sup>3</sup> that convinced Foucault to meet with me. He wrote me a very thoughtful letter, proposing numerous dates and even offering his own apartment as a meeting place.

Throughout our conversation, in addition to his extraordinary gift of speech, he was incredibly kind, taking into consideration my inexperience as an interviewer and even attempting to help with the recording equipment.<sup>4</sup> He was patient, and assured me that my questions were pertinent even when I suspect he found them tiresome. I have no doubt he was surprised at the variety of subjects we covered, and dismayed to see our interview go on so long. He was worried about his fever and his inability to continue our conversation, though he assured me that we had gone well over the length of a typical interview for a weekly paper.<sup>5</sup> What I found extraordinary was that at the same time as he insisted that he lacked the strength to continue, his reflections took on their full vigor.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "Inutile de soulever?" *Le Monde*, 11-2 May 1979, 1-2. Reprinted in Foucault, *Dits et écrits 2: 1976-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (2001), 790-794.

<sup>2</sup> "I have been sick, and later absent," he wrote me in a letter on 20 July 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Mahmoud Hussein is in fact the pseudonym shared by two Egyptian intellectuals who have coauthored numerous works together: Abdel Rifaat and Bahiat anNâdi.

<sup>4</sup> I had only recently defended my doctoral thesis, and after publishing only a few articles as a journalist, the interview with Foucault was my first, a fact of which he was well aware.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault was adamant in insisting that I had succeeded in my task as an interviewer, fitting rather well with Axel Honneth's characterization of him as having "an analytical coldness mixed with a generous sensibility" (Axel Honneth, "Foucault et Adorno: deux formes d'une critique de la modernité," *Critique* 471-472 (1986), 803.)

Foucault's thinking did not waver for a second, and in fact became all the more eager to combat the misinterpretations of his positions.

Foucault's influence among Arab intellectuals was considerable, both in Paris and in the Arab capitals. We admired him for his rigor and his scientific spirit. We followed closely his novel conception of power, as well as his redefinition of the role of the intellectual at a time when the Marxist parties were in decline. His interventions on behalf of prisoners, the mentally handicapped, and immigrants, as well as his stances against racism, were widely applauded, not least because many of them were written in conjunction with the Maoist movement that printed *La cause du peuple*. As Arab intellectuals concerned about their countries' place in the world, they felt an affinity with Foucault that stemmed from a shared global vision of imperialism and how to confront it. But at the same time, they were dissatisfied with Foucault's failure to take a public stance on the Palestinian question, which was always central for them.

Foucault's positions on the Iranian uprising between September 1977 and February 1979, as well as the debates that stretched into May of the following year, emerged in the middle of a state of political and intellectual disarray for the Arab world. The Camp David Accords, signed in March 1979, had shaken the political balance of the region. For some, Islam was emerging as a new source of hope. But after decades of secularism, progressivism, and communism, could the Arab intelligentsia actually take it seriously?

One could hardly say that Foucault's was a guiding voice on Iran for thinkers on the other side of the Mediterranean. But his writings nonetheless helped Arab intellectuals establish a set of relevant questions. Foucault had some awareness of his relationship to his Arab readers when I spoke with him, and made sure to clarify that he had no intention to take the place of those most directly concerned, no pretention to speak in their name. But by taking up the cause of a movement that involved millions of Middle Easterners, he showed for members of a "Muslim" population whose "elite" had previously been somewhat uneasy towards him due to his silence on Palestine.

In our discussion, Foucault went further on certain theoretical issues than he had done in prior interviews, asking big questions such as those concerning the relationship between Islam and the West, between Revolution and religion, and between political will and the law. He went beyond the purview of the "specific intellectual," touching on truly universal questions.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Foucault had no shortage of arguments to demonstrate that his own positions against various forms of power derived from his "specific" intellectual figure. He made these arguments in our interview. But whether or not they are convincing, his subject is today no longer subject to the limits of his analysis in 1978-

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault" [1977], in *Dits et écrits 2: 1976-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (2001), 154. "Les intellectuels ont pris l'habitude de travailler non pas dans l'universel, l'exemplaire, le juste-et-le-vrai-pour-tous, mais dans des secteurs déterminés, en des points précis où les situaient soit leurs conditions de travail, soit leurs conditions de vie (le logement, l'hôpital, l'asile, le laboratoire, l'université, les rapports familiaux ou sexuels). Ils y ont gagné à coup sûr une conscience beaucoup plus concrète et immédiate des luttes. Et ils ont rencontré là des problèmes qui étaient spécifiques, non universels, différents souvent de ceux du prolétariat ou des masses ... c'est ce que j'appellerais l'intellectuel spécifique par opposition à l'intellectuel universel."

1979. To attempt to assess the success of the Iranian uprisings in achieving the goals as Foucault understood them, goes beyond his own speculation. It is a question for millions of people, and for Islam itself.

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I will not attempt to evaluate the novelty of Foucault's positions in this interview, nor seek to link them to his major works or those of other thinkers. I will leave that to those more qualified to do so. Of interest to me is the unique character of the interview as such, and to Foucault himself as an interviewee. The interview as a form of communication "embarrassed" Foucault the author-professor. A "non-statutory form of speech," it is neither writing, nor teaching, nor a conference presentation. "I wonder what sort of thing I will be able to say," he mused on the occasion of an interview with Claude Bonnefoy in 1968.<sup>7</sup> Some ten years later, however, things had undoubtedly changed for Foucault, who had given countless interviews during that interval.<sup>8</sup>

In an interview, the aim of speech is to give itself to the moment in which thought is still in its experimental stage, where it is not yet mature or definitive, where it is improvisational. This element is patent in Foucault's speech. He consistently expresses his humility, the hypothetical character of what he has said; he acknowledges the difficulty of the questions asked and the necessity of dialogue; he reveals, sincerely, his psychology, often in dramatic ways; and he reserves his freedom to change his mind without sacrificing the rigor of his thought.

Putting aside the content of the interview to examine merely its form, we see various levels of discourse at work that are far from absent in the main body of his work. Rather, it is there where they are better integrated and mastered. Foucault begins our conversation as a storyteller, taking us through his Iranian adventure. Speaking at the end of this adventure (while nonetheless promising to return to several of its most striking polemical episodes), he assigns it a theoretical beginning: his reading of Bloch's "little known" book *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. This book poses a capital problem for Foucault, who does not fail to mention the hazards he encounters along the way. Foucault's theoretical origin later joins with reality, both theoretical (the mass uprising) and intellectual (the inadequacy of the Western schemas for interpreting this event). Hence his desire to *go and see*, to seek, to compare, to put to the test.

This poetics of narration was present not only in the beginning of our interview, but also ran throughout the labyrinth of his speculative thought. When I asked him about the three concepts at the center of his writings on Iran, he gave his answer in methodical steps. The first concept, that of the general will, was something Foucault believed he had seen in action in Iran, as well as something with which Westerners have become unfamiliar as they have become habituated to representative government. The second, "Islamic government," was something Foucault heard. His Iranian interlocutors spoke of it frequently. The imprecision and ambiguity of this concept was a mark of both the hope

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Le beau en danger. Entretien avec Claude Bonnefoy* (2011), 26.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Julien Cavagnis for reminding me of this otherwise obvious fact!

and the worry it expressed. The third concept, “political spirituality,” was what others tried to make Foucault say, by denaturing what he had written and by inventing statements he did not make. If we look at this notion with a sort of prosecutorial intrigue, we find a non-crime, the non-event, an assertion of Foucault’s that was almost banal; but we also find a clique of falsifiers, of silly writers for whom no description seems strong enough, even Foucault’s dismissal of them as *des fous*. In the midst of this controversy, Foucault was hurt by a West that made him out to be “a sort of fanatical prophet.” But at the same time, he discovered another vein of polemical discourse where his mastery was apparent in his numerous lapidary formulas.

Starting from the multiple registers of discourse in this interview, one could continue to unpack the various figures of Michel Foucault that are at work in his speech: the reporter of ideas, curious about what is going on in the world and engaging his knowledge in order to understand it; the intellectual, redefining his function by building bridges between the specific and the universal; the partisan of those engaged in revolt, seeking to weaken forms of social stability and historical immobility, questioning what appears natural, necessary, or self-evident; the relativist historian, armed with analogies, resisting identification with his object of studies, but who is not entirely alien or hostile to it; the philosopher, investigating the uprising in search of what grounds it—political will—and repositioning himself alongside other philosophers (Sartre, Fichte) whose systems are irreconcilable with his own thought; the Westerner, refusing to make his views on religion public; the aesthete, admiring the uprising in and for itself with a sort of intoxication; the compassionate artist, caught up in a lyricism he was attempting to master; the individual in his irreducible singularity.

Rereading this interview nearly forty years after conducting it, I am struck by its enduring force. The text does not cease to raise questions about itself and about us. Its fundamental tensions do not waver—despite Foucault’s admitted fatigue—thanks to the vigor of the author’s thought and speech. But above all, Foucault knew how to give it an undeniable unity. Everything turns around the idea of the uprising in all of its reality: collective and individual, concrete and ideal. The treatment of religion, whether contemporary Islam or medieval Christianity, is grounded in history, which lends it its relativity, its hopes, and its failures. Rebellion upsets the relations of power, but also becomes a part of them. It opposes the excesses of power, indicating its limits while establishing itself in law. The role of intellectuals, arising from the nature of their position, is to assist in the shaking of stabilities. Uprisings require a philosophical basis, and cannot hope to find them other than in a will that is distinct from both desire and reason, but given agency by the element of conscience.

## References

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