BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 272 pp., $27.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780816699490.

Foucault's Folly: Iran, Political Spirituality, and Counter-Conduct

Kevin Thompson

Foucault's folly! That, of course, is the common indictment against Foucault's trips to Iran in late September and again in early November of 1978 and the "reportage of ideas" that he produced about the revolution that was then taking place there. It was, it is said, a moment of sheer blindness, a moment that nonetheless exposed his general political naiveté, his so-called "infantile leftism," as well as his seduction by the mythical allure of pure revolutionary struggle for this was a movement—and this was, as so many have pointed out, plain to see at the time—that was seeking to lay the basis for precisely what Foucault infamously declared would never happen: "There will not be a Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government."[1] Foucault's folly thus seemed to confirm the well-worn adage that whoever criticizes modernity—with all that that entails: the supremacy of reason, the universality of human rights, democracy, and the conception of history as a continuous march towards the ideal of a kingdom of ends—leaves themself vulnerable, at best, to the nostalgia of a romanticized pre-modern past and, at worst, to tacitly endorsing the reign of terror of some insurgent fascism. On this account, Foucault's supposed turn to ethics in his late writings and, with it, his embracing of the Enlightenment are all taken then to be indicative of his recognition, even repudiation, of the very anti-modernism that had been at the core of his earlier work on discourse and power.

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[1] Michel Foucault, "Le chef mythique de la révolte de l'Iran," in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2001), 716; English translation as "The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt," in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 222.

We thus owe an immense debt to Professor Ghamari-Tabrizi for his study, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, enables us, really in my judgment for the first time, to begin to assess these charges with the social, historical, and intellectual framework that such a discussion demands finally in place. It is a work that wears its immense erudition lightly and brings rigorous scholarship about the Iranian Revolution and Foucault's engagement with it to bear on two principal questions: (1) How did Foucault understand the Iranian Revolution; and (2) How might his reflections on this movement enable us to think what it might mean "to make history" beyond the purview of the dominant Western teleological conception of revolution? Ghamari-Tabrizi's treatment of these questions, in the end, makes a strong case for the claim that Foucault's later thought, and in particular his reengagement with Kant's conception of enlightenment not as a period of Western history, but as a critical process of leaving behind (*Ausgang*) self-incurred immaturity, that is, as Ghamari-Tabrizi puts is, as a "ceaseless act of becoming" (176), was motivated by what he saw happening on the ground, in the streets, and in the mosques during those days in Tehran.

In establishing this thesis, Ghamari-Tabrizi not only provides us with a lucid and penetrating account of the major intellectual and cultural sources of the revolution itself, he also offers a sustained critical analysis of the other major work in the field: Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson's *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*. I will leave it to my fellow symposiasts to judge the historical account that Ghamari-Tabrizi constructs regarding the revolution and, in particular, the role played there by Shi'i rituals, Ali Shari'ati's political ideology, and, of course, the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini himself, but, as to the readings and reconstructions of Foucault's thought, I found the analyses to be exceptionally attentive to the nuances of Foucault's discussions and to the different kinds of arguments that he was mounting. I think that they conclusively demonstrate the facileness of Afary and Anderson's interpretations as well as of those who have followed in their wake.

Consider, for example, the role of silence in Foucault's work. Afary and Anderson contend that Foucault's appeals to silence as a form of expression is evidence of his ignorance of the ways in which prohibitions to speak have actually been imposed by the dominant on children, women, and the lower classes in various premodern societies and they take this to be indicative of his general nostalgia for the aristocratic past and of his fascination with the exotic. But, as Ghamari-Tabrizi expertly shows, this analysis is predicated on a simple failure to recognize that Foucault drew a clear distinction in his histories between silence as an instrument of exclusion (the *silenced* self found in the cloister, the prison, the school, and the regiment) and as a discipline of self-formation (*being* silent as a practitioner of Stoicism or Zen Buddhism) and a willful misrepresentation that his treatment of the latter had anything to do with his justifying or approving of the former (106-108).

Now with this overview of some of the basic lines of argument of the book in hand, I would like to focus on two concepts: one that Professor Ghamari-Tabrizi discusses extensively, namely, political spirituality, the other he does not address at all, counter-conduct. I see both issues as opening up avenues to explore more deeply and to further the important conversation that Ghamari-Tabrizi's work begins. Note that my concern here is ultimately philosophical rather than historical. I thus see both concepts as taking up the question of how Foucault's reflections on the Iranian Revolution might aid us in thinking revolution beyond the paradigm of linear progression and towards that of a ceaseless becoming.

I. Political Spirituality

The first question that I would like to raise deals with the distinctive social ontology of revolutionary movements. Simply stated, my question is how did the political spirituality of Shi'ism enable the Iranian people to form themselves into a genuinely collective political agent and how might this serve for us today as a model for the constitution of revolutionary forces?

A number of factors, of course, drew Foucault actually to travel to Iran. There was his by then typical method of gathering and disseminating information as itself a form of political engagement, a method he had honed most fully in his work with the Prisons Information Group in 1970-1973, but had actually practiced long before. Instead of speaking of madness in general, he trained in psychiatric hospitals, and rather than discussing the legal system abstractly, he investigated actual prison conditions. So instead of writing about revolutions, he sought actually to witness one. That this particular uprising, due to Iran's vast natural resources and its strategic location, also played out against the backdrop of the Cold War only made this specific rebellion even more intriguing to him. But the element that Foucault came back to time and again to explain his interest in this unique event was the role that religion was playing in it, and specifically the ways in which Shi'ite spiritual practices, such as its distinctive rituals of mourning and burying martyrs and the Muharram reenactments of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in his revolt against Yazid, were able to forge the various groups in Iran into a genuine revolutionary force, a distinctly collective will.[2]

Thanks to the publication of the transcript of an interview that Farès Sassine conducted with Foucault in August of 1979, an interview from which only excerpts translated into Arabic appeared in 1979, we now know more about what was behind this interest in the religious dimension of the revolution. Sassine begins the interview by asking Foucault to assess his views on the revolution, some ten months after his visits to the country, by describing what interested him in Iran in the first place. His answer is as telling as it is fascinating: it was an idea that he had discovered in reading a book that was not well-known in France at the time, though it had just been translated, Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. There he found Bloch's articulation of the notion that within time and history itself an opening to a better world could be forged, an opening that meant something like a fundamental transformation of the social and political order was possible. This idea, the very idea of revolution itself, was, Foucault tells us, not well developed historically by Bloch, so he began to research it in his lectures at the Collège de France—it appears that this material formed the basis, for instance, for the lecture on "pastoral counter-conducts" from 1 March 1978,[3] a lecture to which we shall return in the next section—and found that the idea that another world is possible had a distinctive religious origin ("It was essentially religious groups and, above all, dissident religious groups who, at the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance, carried the idea that, within the world itself, something like revolution was possible."):

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[2] On these factors, which draw in part on an unpublished section of the interview Duccio Trombardori did with Foucault in December of 1978, see Marcelo Hoffman, *Foucault and Power: The Influence of Political Engagement on Theories of Power* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 110-111.

[3] See Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2004), 195-232; English translation as *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 191-226.

> so if you like, I was reading this, when every day the newspapers were telling me that in Iran something was taking place that was an uprising, an uprising that had the character of not being clearly commanded by a Western revolutionary ideology, which was not controlled or directed by a political party, or even by political organizations, something that was a truly mass uprising: it was wholly a people rising up against a system in power, and finally, one in which the importance of religious phenomenon, of religious institutions, of religious representation was so clear… It seemed to me then that there was a relationship between what I was reading and what was happening. And I wanted to go see. And I truly saw it as an example, a test, of what I was reading in Ernst Bloch. There. So, if you like, the fact that I was there, with an eye, if you will, conditioned by this problem of political revolution and hope or religious eschatology.[4]

Now Foucault clearly tells us that what he witnessed in Iran was nothing less than the actual existence of what he had always thought could only be a juridical-political myth: "the collective will of a people."[5] And he claims that what this collective will sought was nothing other than the overthrow of the Shah, which entailed, he argued, everything else: "the end of dependency, the disappearance of the police, the redistribution of oil revenue, an attack on corruption, the reactivation of Islam, another way of life, new relations with the West, with

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[4] The passages that I have translated here are taken from "Entrien inedit avec Michel Foucault." The interview was conducted by Sassine for the Paris newspaper, *An-Nahar al-`Arabi wa'd-Duwali*. It was published in full and for the first time in French in *Revue Rodéo* 2 (2013). The quotations are from the transcript that Sassine published on his blog on 22 August 2014, <http://fares-sassine.blogspot.fr/2014/08/entretien-inedit-avec-michel-foucault.html>, (accessed January 1, 2017).

It is worth noting here that, as Ghamari-Tabrizi himself acknowledges (64), Foucault had actually proposed a definition of political spirituality at a round table in May of 1978 some four months before his first trip to Iran. Foucault notes that his own driving concern is the ways in which the division (*partage*) between what is true and what is false is intertwined with the ways of governing oneself and others, that is to say, with the ways in which forms of knowledge and practices of power become entangled, and, in this context, he remarks that:

> The will to found (*fonder*), entirely new, the one and the other, *the one by the other* (emphases added) (to discover a wholly other division [of true and false] by another way of governing, and a wholly other governing of oneself taking off from (*à partir*) another division [of true and false]), that is "political spirituality." ("Table ronde du 20 mai 1978," *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, 849; English translation as "Questions of Method," in T*he Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991], 82 [translation modified]).

Here political spirituality is said to be a certain kind of willing, a striving to establish a new configuration, a new *ensemble*, between modes of representation and techniques of governance. And that it creates new arrangements of power and knowledge precisely *in and through* this relationship—that is, it founds new practices of power and new forms of knowledge *by using the one to create the other and vice versa*—rather than by intervening on either or both from without.

[5] Discussion between Foucault, Claire Brière, and Pierre Blanchet, "L'esprit d'un monde sans esprit," in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, 746; English translation as "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit," in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, 253.

Arab countries, with Asia, and so forth."[6] And at the heart of this will, just as he had suspected, stood religion. But religion not as the conventions of Western thought would hold. It was not an ideology masking more profound social and economic contradictions, nor an institution legitimating the existent social order. Rather, it was religious practice, instead of any doctrine or dogma, that was the thread that bound the Iranian people together, that made of them a genuine collective revolutionary force.

Ghamari-Tabrizi develops an extremely sensitive account of this point. At its core, he argues that, for Foucault, Shi'a practices provided "the vocabulary, the ceremonial, the timeless drama into which the historical drama of a people that put its existence in the balance against that of its sovereign could be lodged."[7] These practices "made thousands of discontents, hatreds, miseries, and despairs into a *force*" and Shi'ism was able to do this because this spirituality was a "form of expression, a mode of social relations, a supple and widely accepted elementary organization, a way of being together, a way of speaking and listening, something that allowed one to be understood by others, and to strive (*vouloir*) with them at the same time."[8] But, and this is my question, how exactly did this work? How did these unique practices forge a genuinely unified will?

Now, beyond these last remarks, Foucault did not himself really address this question. Ghamari-Tabrizi thus proposes a twofold approach to this issue: first, he turns to Foucault's later discussions of the care of the self in Classical Antiquity to lay out a sense of spirituality as a form of self-constitution whereby one forms oneself as a moral subject and he then shows how Foucault's treatment of Islam, influenced as it was by the scholarship of Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin and by the thought of the Iranian sociologist Ali Shari'ati, continually moved the discussion of the basis for the revolutionary movement away from the textualist and legalistic reading of Shi'ism that had been dominant especially in the West to a focus on its practical injunction that social and political revolution is predicated on personal and corporate transformation (63-67, cf. 176-180).

But, as lucid and persuasive as this approach is, I still wonder if it really captures the ways in which the public rituals that were so central to creating and sustaining the revolutionary movement served as sites for the constitution of a genuinely collective will. The care of the self in ancient Greece and Rome, I fear, despite Ghamari-Tabrizi's insistence to the contrary (176-178), remains a much too individualistic practice—it is about how one accesses the truth about oneself and about the cosmos, and it is concerned with others, but it is not itself a necessarily shared practice—and thus appealing to it here in this way seems to desocialize the very techniques that forged the Iranians into a revolutionary force, a collective will.[9]

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[6] Michel Foucault, "Le chef mythique de la révolte de l'Iran," in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, 715; English translation as "The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt," in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, 221.

[7] Foucault, Brière, and Blanchet, "L'esprit d'un monde sans esprit," 746; "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit,", 252 [translation modified].

[8] Michel Foucault, "Téhéran: la foi contre le chah," in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, 688; English translation as "Tehran: Faith against the Shah," in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, 202-203 [translation modified].

[9] In saying this, I do not mean to deny Ghamari-Tabrizi's thesis that Foucault's engagement with the Iranian Revolution taught him to be attentive to the transformative character of spiritual practices (173-185), an insight he found confirmed in a different way in the work of Pierre Hadot, and explored historically in his lectures from 1979 until his death in 1984. And I wholeheartedly agree that the significance of the Revolution in this regard has largely been missed by even the most astute commentators (183-184).

I suggest that we might do better in getting at Foucault's important insights here if, instead of turning to his later work, we stay with the interests that brought him to Iran in the first place and that means Bloch's conception of "concrete utopias" and his exploration of dissident religious groups in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance.

Recall that Foucault's historical references in his lecture course from the spring of 1978 are all principally to the European Radical Reformation, and more specifically to uprisings and rebellions that were carried out by those whom historian Norman Cohn (Foucault's principal source for this material) dubbed "revolutionary millenarians" and "mystic anarchists."[10] What these social-political-religious movements represented, for Foucault, were instances of political spirituality supporting insubordination against the pastoral powers of their day. They sought to challenge not governing as such, but the specific extent and mode of governance under which they lived. But the political spirituality that gave rise to these movements and sustained them was always, as Foucault notes, an intensely shared practice, a corporate non-hierarchical experience of transformation, as they sought to rethink what it meant to be the body of Christ in the world beyond the confines of both Catholicism and the Reformed churches.[11]

My question again, then, is how are we to understand the distinctly public nature of the political spirituality of Shi'ism and how this enabled the Iranian people to constitute themselves as a genuinely collective political agent? And, perhaps more importantly, how might such practices and experiences serve us today as models for the constitution of revolutionary forces? Are such genuinely shared practices and associations even possible in an age that remains defined by the culture of the self, albeit now an entrepreneurial one?

II. Counter-Conduct

Tracing the concept of political spirituality back to Foucault's examination of the radical European religious communities of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance raises an issue about which Ghamari-Tabrizi does not speak and that is the concept of counter-conduct, for it was precisely in this context that Foucault first created this crucial term to speak of resistance in all its varied and subtle forms. The question that I would like to pose here then seeks to grapple with the nature of political agency: Can the Iranian Revolution be properly understood as a form of counter-conduct?

To see what this means, we must begin by recalling the basic outlines of Foucault's definition of power as a form of conduct. The concept has two senses: (1) it designates a general activity, that of directing or orchestrating, conducting (*conduire*) or conduction (*la conduction*), and (2) it also refers to human behavior, the way in which one conducts oneself (*se conduit*), that is, one's own conduct. To exercise power thus consists in "conducting conduct (*conduire de conduits*)." To govern is thus to mold the field of possibilities within which others act, orchestrating the space in which they conduct themselves, setting in place, by various and oftentimes quite subtle means, an arena of possible actions such that

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[10] These same references appear in a pair of important public lectures from this same time: "La philosophie analytique de la politique," which was delivered in Japan in April of 1978, and "Qu'est-ce que la critique? [Critique et Aufklärung]," which was presented in Paris in May. For Norman Cohn's important research, see his *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Oxford University Press, 1970).

[11] On this point, see Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 211-215; *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 208-211.

another's behavior has a certain trajectory, a set of preformed limits, a directionality. Power is thus the creation of a field of structured possibility within which certain types of action can occur. The central point in this model is that, in such practices of governing, rather than sheer domination, the others whose actions are being molded are always recognized, albeit in the extreme only minimally, as agents with the capacity to act in and through such structuring. Those under such governance are thus taken to be capable of deliberating and pursuing amongst the range of options or trajectories arrayed before them.

Foucault developed this conduct model of power in the 1978 lecture course to which we referred earlier[12] and he created, to pair with it, the concept of "counter-conduct."[13] With this he sought, he said, to articulate the varied and often quite subtle ways in which the religious dissident communities of the Middle Ages through the advent of Modernity struggled *with and against* pastoral power, a form of government that sought, through the office of the minister (the pastorate), to shepherd its flock to its salvation. He invented the term, he tells us, precisely as opposed to revolt, dissent, disobedience, misconduct, insubordination, or, even, dissidence, all of which he deemed inadequate either because (as in the case of revolt) they were too strong and precise to denote the myriad diffuse forms of resistance or too passive (as in the case of misconduct) to capture the way in which these forms nonetheless remain profound ways of directing oneself.

Foucault isolates five main forms of counter-conduct in this period: asceticism, community, mysticism, Scripture, and eschatology.[14] What they all share in common, he argues, is that they take up elements of Western Christianity to contest its pastoral form of governance. That is to say, on Foucault's analysis, Western Christianity is, perhaps paradoxically, not fundamentally ascetic, communal, scriptural, or eschatological. Rather, at its core stands the pastor's governing of the souls of his congregation. Hence, whether like the Anabaptist communities and their predecessors (the Waldensians or the Hussites) and their rejection of obligatory infant baptism or the Congregation of Fiore and its eschatology of the Age of the Spirit in which all the faithful bear a fragment, a spark, of the Holy Spirit within themselves, all these resistance movements practiced forms of shared existence that no longer had any need for and thus contested the very structure of shepherding. Yet, the way in which these practices accomplish this is not by rejecting Christianity outright, but rather, each employs or reallocates what Foucault calls "marginal" or "border-elements" of Christianity—*ascesis*, the search for community, mystical experience, scriptural devotion, and beliefs about the *eschaton*—to call into question and thus to struggle against it. In other words, they use the mechanisms afforded by the pastoral form of power to contest it:

> the struggle was not carried out in the form of absolute exteriority, but rather in the form of the permanent utilization of tactical elements that are

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[12] For this account, see Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 196-197; *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 192-193.

[13] See Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 200-205; *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 197-202. For a more comprehensive discussion of counter-conduct, see Arnold I. Davidson, "In praise of counter-conduct," *History of the Human Sciences* 24.4 (2011): 24-41.

[14] See Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 208-218; *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 204-214.

> pertinent in the anti-pastoral struggle, insofar as they fall within, even in a marginal way, the general horizon of Christianity.[15]

Counter-conducts contest power, then, in both its senses. They seek to forge a different way of life, a different conduct, by forming a different way of being directed, a different conduction, and they do so precisely by using the means made available by the very form of power that they seek to undermine.

My question, then, is this: in their struggle against the Pahlavi dynasty, can we say that the Iranian people made use of elements of this regime's mode of governing precisely to contest it? To be sure, Foucault does not himself explicitly mention any such reversals or inversions, as far as I can tell, in his writings on the Revolution. But is not part of the danger of simply replicating the prior mode of government what he sought to identify in his open letter to Mehdi Bazargan, the newly installed provisional Prime Minister, from April of 1979:

> Concerning the expression "Islamic government," why cast immediate suspicion on the adjective "Islamic"? The word "government" suffices, in itself, to awaken vigilance. No adjective—whether democratic, socialist, liberal, or people's—free it from its obligations.[16]

Let me conclude this response by again recalling that I believe *Foucault in Iran* marks a decisive and important watershed in the on-going discussion of Foucault's analyses of the Iranian Revolution and what that might mean for us still today. All future analyses will have to engage with what it has shown. We all bear an immense debt to Professor Ghamari-Tabrizi for this rigorous and exciting study.

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Kevin Thompson
Associate Professor of Philosophy
DePaul University

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[15] Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 219; *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, 215.

[16] Michel Foucault, "Lettre ouverte à Mehdi Bazargan," in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, 781; English translation as "Open Letter to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan," in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, 261. This passage is cited by Ghamari-Tabrizi at 159, but he does not pursue the significance of Foucault's appeal to government in this context.