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*Revisiting Foucault in Iran:  
A Response*

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First, I would like to thank *SCTIW Review* for organizing this symposium. It is a great privilege to read such a comprehensive scrutiny of one's own work. I know how time consuming this kind of critical engagement with a text is and would also like to extend my deep appreciation to all the respondents.

For the most part, I wrote *Foucault in Iran* as a point of departure for a conversation on historiography and epistemological questions concerning ways of knowing. These questions probe the trajectories of memory, history, ideology, and conceptual commitments to the ways we understand the world. I agree with Anthony Alessandrini's assessment that the point of the book is not to determine whether Foucault, or any other observer of the revolution, was "right" or "wrong," but to examine *how* he reached his conclusions. This, of course, does not mean that I am, or Foucault was, ambivalent about the ontological questions at the root of the revolution or that I look at politics exclusively from a stoic position without regard to the real consequences of political action.

*Foucault in Iran* also highlights the contingent core historical change; the idea that history does not unfold, it is made. In a Foucauldian tradition of thinking about the history of the present, it draws attention to the constitutive link between writing history and making history. In the first chapter, I tried to demonstrate these points through a retelling of the emergence of the revolutionary movement in 1977-1978. In the book, I argue that Foucault viewed the revolutionary movement as the expression of a desire to be included in history in order to exist in it. This seemingly paradoxical view points to the way he thought that the movement in Iran operated at the threshold of a novelty: exceptional in the clarity with which they rejected the Shah and deeply reluctant to accept the already existing schemes of governance. This is perhaps the most significant lesson one can draw from Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution. Revolutions do not mark instances of the unfolding of a historical *telos*, rather they make history the subject of their actions. I do recognize that this type of historiography generates certain political anxieties that stem from the disappearance of a universal Referent.

Millions of Iranians just celebrated the 38<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution. Every year around this time, members of the parliament, government officials, military commanders, and scholars with diverse theoretical proclivities revisit the core demands of the revolutionary movement with new claims about the true meaning of the revolution. Why did the revolution happen? What was it all about? That is a reminder that the meaning of the revolution remains a contested field, even, and more significantly, among its winners. That partly explains why, unlike other world historical moments, the conventional history of the Iranian revolution was written not by those who reigned after the revolution, the victors, but by the defeated, those who failed to join the post-revolutionary state power.

Foucault set aside the questions of causality and historical inevitability and highlighted the significance of the revolutionary *experience*, how it changed subjects' relationship to themselves and to others. In one of his earlier notes on the revolutionary situation in Iran, he situated the soul of the uprising in a series of questions that Iranians must have asked themselves: "Of course, we have to change this regime and get rid of this man, we have to change this corrupt administration, we have to change the whole country, the political organization, the economic system, the foreign policy. But, above all, *we have to change ourselves*. Our way of being, our relationship with others, with things, with eternity, with God, etc., must be completely changed, and there will only be a true revolution if this radical change in our experience takes place."<sup>1</sup> Foucault understood this change as a spiritual transformation, a rupture that had a literal and corporeal meaning in a real Foucauldian inversion, the unforeseen liberation of the body from the prison house of the soul. The spirituality he witnessed in Iran offered a fissure in the otherwise ubiquitous techniques of governmentality about which he had been writing for most of his career.

Foucault underscored the singularity through which an expansive transformative politics, with its distinct Islamic-Shi'i revolutionary expression, unfolded during the uprising. His emphasis on that singularity of the revolutionary experience leads, rightly so, to the problem of "solidarity" that Alessandrini poses, and which is implicit in Banu Bargu's concerns about Foucault's Orientalist inclinations and, by extension, Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi's comments on feminist politics and the women's movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "Iran the Spirit of a World without Spirit," in Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 255.

I interpret the singular, or particular, not as a concept in contradistinction to the universal. Rather, singularity here denotes a conjunctural assembly of events, processes, and historical patterns that form a distinct instance of individual and collective transformation, a transformation informed and conditioned by universal material and subjective realities in particular temporal and spatial trajectories. Rather than a designation of authenticity, singularity here marks the manifestation of *situated* universality, the way it is embodied in revolutionary action and ideology. In that sense, solidarity emerges through the recognition of those temporal and spatial trajectories, not despite of them from a privileged imperial position. Not only is such recognition significant in a transnational context, but also, and more importantly, it is the very foundation of a revolutionary movement in any society. Solidarity works through mutual recognition, organically, in a true Gramscian sense, through the formations of particular historical blocs.

In the retelling of the narrative of the revolutionary movement, I tried to show how the movement that Foucault called “irreducible” to the interests or positions of any specific class, political party, or social group was already deeply diverse. Multiple sources of political, philosophical, religious, and historical inspirations informed that diversity. As I argue in the book, as a revolutionary ideology, Islamism was considerably influenced by Marxism, postcolonialism, existentialism, and non-aligned national liberation movements. The same was true for Iranian Marxism that was articulated and practiced in a highly specific Shi’i nationalist context. Solidarity is already embedded in the type of singularity that *Foucault in Iran* highlights, singularities that are transformable, transferable, and transmissible.

In a similar vein, I do not read Foucault’s identification of something distinctive in the uprising that transcended class, gender, ethnicity, and other differentiating affinities as an Orientalist misgiving. I agree with Banu Bargu that his “espousal of unity and omission of difference with that unity are significant, especially given the difference this view presents with respect to Foucault’s former pronouncements about the local, disparate, and heterogeneous character of instances of resistance.” As she points out, this needs further elaboration and an explicit conversation on how Foucault deviates from his earlier views on the modalities of resistance and his thoughts on heterotopia. At the same time, it is worth remembering that Foucault viewed the unity he witnessed in Iran as a fleeting moment, something extraordinary and provisional that was not achieved through intercession between various groups. “Something different has happened,” he wrote. “A phenomenon has traversed the entire people and will one day stop.”<sup>2</sup>

I also agree with what Bargu frames as Foucault’s anti-Occidentalism. In much of his oeuvre on the history of ideas, disciplinary regimes, and regulative systems of governmentality, Foucault often explicitly reminds his readers of the Western specificity of his subject. For example, in his careful examination, Ian Almond shows that Foucault defined his projects invariably as studies of, be it *chronos*, *topos*, or *logos*, Western subjects.<sup>3</sup> But in doing so, he is also very clear that “there can be no question of interpreting discourse with a view to writing a history of the referent.” His project has always been to “dispense with ‘things.’ To ‘depresentify’ them.” Rather than discovering the “enigmatic treasure of things anterior to discourse,” the point for Foucault is relating things to the body of rules that

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 23.

enable them to constitute the conditions of their historical appearance.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, Foucault's anti-Occidentalism does not construe the West in a state of alienation and inauthenticity the inverse of which one might locate in the Orient. One would be hard pressed to imagine that kind of nostalgic view of the Orient coming from one of the most important philosophers of historical understanding of alterity.

In no uncertain terms do I interpret Foucault's observation and understanding of alterity as evidencing a deep knowledge of Shi'ism or Iranian history. I do not, as Batmanghelichi asserts, argue that, "Foucault knows 'Islamic-Shi'i' Iran better than an uninformed, American secular feminist." I fear that is not why I included a chapter on the women's movement and feminist politics in the book. There are two important reasons that I highlighted the March 8, 1979, rallies in one chapter. First, I wanted to underline Foucault's willingness to recognize conceptually generative significance of the revolutionary events in Iran. As I explain in the book's introduction, in his writings, Foucault avoided committing himself to formal and familiar tropes and discourses of revolutions and the binary constructs with which they are associated. I wanted to put Foucault's conceptual skepticism in contrast with a feminist intervention that viewed the events in Iran as an extension of and only explicable through its universal Referent (women's bodies and patriarchy). I did not intend to privilege Foucault's knowledge of Shi'ism over feminist activists from Europe and the United States. As I discuss clearly in the book, I believe Foucault's knowledge of Shi'ism was limited and informed by a very mystic interpretation at the expense of common juridical and doctrinal schools, which have proved to be institutionally enduring and politically resilient. Neither did he (or for that matter, anyone) know at the time what an Islamic government meant, nor did he defend the establishment of it.

As Navid Pourmokhtari rightly reminds us, the underpinning assumption in social movement theories was, and continues to be, that the Iranian revolution, and the ensuing Islamic social movements, represented an "anti-movement" for a "regressive utopianism." Key figures of social movement theory such as Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci, as Pourmokhtari explains, brushed aside the conceptual, political, and historical significance of these movements by simply and indiscriminately conceptualizing them as a uniform "mythical quest for the Lost Paradise," which "crystaliz[ed] into fanatic fundamentalism."

What I discussed as problematic in the feminist intervention in 1979 in Tehran lies in the way the activists launched their mission in Iran based on similar assumptions. In the chapter on the women's movement and feminist politics, I offer a detailed account of how *Iranian women* and their spokespersons articulated *their own* manifold and intricate objections to and their own mobilization against the new restrictions imposed upon women in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. Western feminists who declared solidarity with their Iranian sisters displayed an ungenerous curiosity about the specificities of the moment and the kind of singularity that generated that particular post-revolutionary event.

Secondly, I am well aware of different ways that feminist scholars have advanced critiques of Foucault's gendered theory of power and resistance, many of which I find convincing and important. My purpose in the chapter on the women's movement, however, is a different one. I wanted to show how Western feminists failed to recognize the intersectional core of that movement and the complex ways in which anti-colonialism, class, cultural, gender, and identity politics converged with all their intensity three weeks after one of the most popular revolutions in the world history. I believe no effective politics could be

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 47-48.

articulated without the recognition of the intersectionality that generated that historical moment. This is a point that takes me back to Alessandrini's concern about solidarity. I do not believe that the recognition of an intersectional singularity should be understood as an isolationist stance. As Kimberlé Crenshaw and other critical race and postcolonial feminists have established, an intersectional approach is a necessary way of adding complexity to relations of power and showing how systems of inequality and oppression operate on multiple terrains. It is a position against speaking of a universal emancipatory politics from a privileged, trans-historical standpoint.

I do recognize the deep political relevance of such epistemological claims, and how moments such as women's protests in Iran inevitably generate animated responses and impassioned debates. By no means, do I advocate the silencing of voices, be they secular, bourgeois, exilic, working class, anti-imperialist, Muslim, or liberal. I do raise questions, however, about those who believe that they speak from the position of historical inevitabilities, that they embody the progressive logic of history. Indeed, with fears of beating a dead horse, I will restate that it is this very linearity as a mode of understanding history that is at issue.

Kevin Thompson raises a key question on how through political spirituality and the ethics of the care of the self, something seemingly individual turned into collective political action in Iran. I doubt that there could be a persuasive answer to that very important question. As Foucault observed in one of the most passionate passages in his philosophical reportage, "[T]he man in revolt is ultimately inexplicable. There must be an uprooting that 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."<sup>5</sup> Even more mystifying is how that transformation takes the shape of a *collective* revolutionary action.

I would like to think that both possibilities of understanding the care of the self are at play here, in its Greek and Roman sense, as an individual(ist) as well as a collective endeavor. Clearly Foucault views the individual in relational terms, but I agree with Thompson that that in itself may not be interpreted as the care of the self as a collective project. And let's not forget that in his first lecture in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, when he discusses the notion of the care of the self, he identifies three components of this care, the first of which is a general attitude with respect to oneself, to others, and to the world. In a Platonic sense, Foucault also asserts that in order to have access to one's own Truth, one has to pay a price that is determined by the kind of work one needs to carry out on one's self, a transformation, a rupture. Such a "Truth-seeking" project may be carried out as an individual self-transformational act, or in particular historical moments, that could turn into collective action, as it did, I posit, during the Iranian revolution.

I am so glad that Thompson brings up Foucault's reading of Ernst Bloch. I think there is something there that might help us to understand Foucault's particular reading of the spirit of the revolution. In my first book,<sup>6</sup> I discussed how important it was for Bloch to defend the notion of utopia and argue a society dispossessed of the narrative skill to envision alternative political, economic, and cultural relations is dead. But more importantly, and relevant to Foucault's essays, was the way in which Bloch linked the conception of utopia to the principle of hope. Bloch located utopia in the "Not-Yet-Become" of folklore, in the popular desire to hope and strive for a better life expressed in myth, fairytales, and

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, "Is it Useless to Revolt?" in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 263.

<sup>6</sup> Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

daydreams.<sup>7</sup> I think here we can see a clear connection, as Thompson suggests, between Foucault's conception of the revolutionary movement and his reservations for understanding it on predetermined terms with Bloch's articulation of utopian desires in *The Principles of Hope*.

I do agree that Foucault was not looking at the revolution in Iran *tabula rasa*. But at the same time *Foucault in Iran* argues that the revolution sparked something original in Foucault's mind. Thompson is correct to frame Foucault's encounter in his earlier writings on religious dissent in the Middle Ages and the notion of counter-conduct. But we need to remember that Foucault used the notion of "counter-conduct" specifically in order to avoid using terms such as "revolt" and "uprising," which he thought was too strong of a designation for a form of resistance that remained in an immanent relation of non-exteriority with Christian pastoral power. He delivered the lectures on the concept of counter-conduct in April 1978, only a few months before his first trip to Iran in September.<sup>8</sup> In Iran he decidedly speaks of *revolt*, *uprising*, and *revolution*, and clearly underscores its exteriority to the existing order, albeit with all the ambiguities through which it operated.

Foucault saw in the exteriority that attracted him to the revolution in Iran an under-articulated critique of instrumental Reason. He understood the revolution as a radical skepticism toward the promise of *Aufklärung*, "of attaining freedom through the exercise of reason." Foucault made the remarks on the condition of unfreedom and the pervasive domain of Reason that is taking more and more space away from freedom also in 1978 right before his travel to Iran and in relation to his intellectual affinity with the Frankfurt School.<sup>9</sup> In that sense, I think Corey McCall is entirely right to situate Foucault's writing in a broader context of the critical theorists' ideology critique. Ideology, as McCall points out, is primarily a non-Foucauldian concept. Although, a more Althusserian view of ideology as *omni-historical*, as an immutable form throughout history, was available to Foucault, he remained hesitant to use the term ideology because of his general assumption that considered the term a subjective construct that masks objective reality.

I conceptualized as *doctrinal* assertions what McCall identifies as the *ideology* of the Enlightenment (objective truth-claims; teleological history; and binary perception of public-private spheres). In doing so, I wanted to draw clearer links between the way Foucault thought about the role of religion in the revolutionary movement in Iran and his later reading of *Aufklärung*. In both cases he distinguishes between doctrinal convictions (in religion or Reason) and a general spirit, an attitude that makes possible a certain kind of freedom in thought and in action.

Every commentary in this symposium raises important questions about *Foucault in Iran*, and more generally on different ways of analyzing an important historical moment. I am

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<sup>7</sup> Bloch offers an alternative to totalizing "cognitive mapping" by incorporating folk culture into his conception of utopia. In the introduction to his *magnum opus*, *The Principle of Hope*, he wrote, "[Wishful images in the mirror] clear completely as soon as the mirror comes from the people, as occurs quite visibly and wonderfully in fairytales. The mirrored...common to all of them is a drive towards the colorful, representing what is supposedly or genuinely better. The appeal of dressing-up, illuminated *display* belong here, but then the world of *fairy tale*, brightened distanced in *travel*, the *dance*, the dream-factory of *film*, the example of *theater*... However, if this sketching out turns into a free and considered blueprint, then we find ourselves for the first time among the actual, that is, *planned or outlined utopias*" (Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. 1, trans. N. Plaice, S. Plaice, and P. Knight [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986], 13).

<sup>8</sup> Lectures were published later as Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *Remarks On Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

grateful for the opportunity to clarify some of the less developed arguments in the book, and for the care and intelligence with which the authors engaged the text.

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