

Editor's Note

The texts assembled here are taken directly from the appendix of the book *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, published in 2005 by the University of Chicago Press and printed in the USA. The 'Introduction' and 'Note on the Translations and Annotation' have also been included, although the parts relating only to texts not included here have been removed. Any obvious grammatical errors have been corrected.

Introduction

The order of the texts in this appendix generally follows that of their original publication. Unless otherwise indicated, Foucault is the author. Foucault's writings and interviews on Iran were first published between September 1978 and May 1979, a period that spanned the Iranian Revolution and its immediate aftermath. They took the form of newspaper reports, interviews, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor. Most of the material included here consists of newspaper articles that Foucault published in the leading Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera*, which had sent him to Iran as a special correspondent in the fall of 1978. Although *Corriere della sera* datelined the articles "Tehran," Foucault actually wrote them in France upon his return from two trips to Iran, the first from September 16 to September 24 and the second from November 9 to November 15, 1978. Since *Corriere della sera* translated the articles into Italian, they did not appear in French at the time. However, Foucault published a smaller but not insignificant portion of his writings on Iran in several French publications, including the left-of-centre weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* and the leading newspaper *Le Monde*. From June 1979 until his death in 1984, Foucault never referred publicly to Iran. In addition, one of the texts included here, a September 1978 dialogue between the Iranian writer Baqir Parham and Foucault, was first published in Persian in the spring of 1979 in *Nameh-yi Kanun-i Nevisandegan* (Publication of the Center of Iranian Writers). Except for this interview, the original French versions of all of Foucault's writings and interviews on Iran appeared in French some fifteen years later, in volume 3 of *Dits et écrits*, a four-volume collection edited by Daniel Defert and François Ewald, with Jacques Lagrange (Foucault 1994b). Most of Foucault's writings on Iran (up to February 1979) were later translated into Persian and published by Hussein Ma'sumi Hamadani (Foucault 1998).

Note on the Translations and the Annotation

Unless otherwise indicated, Karen de Bruin and Kevin B. Anderson carried out the translation from the French of these writings. The rest were translated as follows: (1) Foucault's interview with the leftist journalists Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet was translated from the French by Alan Sheridan. (2) Janet Afary translated Foucault's September 1978 dialogue with Parham in *Nameh-yi Kanun-i Nevisandegan* from the Persian. Throughout this appendix, unless otherwise indicated, the notes are by Afary and Anderson.

Dialogue Between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham

Conducted in September 1978 and published in *Nameh-yi Kanun-i Nevisandegan* (Publication of the Center of Iranian Writers), no. 1 (Spring 1979): 9–17.

PREFACE BY PARHAM: Michel Foucault, the famous French thinker and philosopher, was recently in Iran. He came to visit the country, to travel around, and to write several articles on it. His trips apparently took him to Qom,¹ where he spoke with some of the Grand Ayatollahs. Although Foucault is not well known in Iran, he has an immense reputation in the world of philosophy. By first analysing the field of medicine and its history, he initiated a unique and penetrating study of reason, of the structure and organisation of knowledge. He has a number of valuable works, such as *Madness and Civilization*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and *The Order of Things*. Foucault's short trip to Iran was an occasion to have a conversation with him about structuralism and some other key issues. Perhaps, in a search for an answer to them, he has come to this end of the world. This interview was conducted on Saturday, September 23, 1978, in Tehran.

PARHAM: Philosophy has a claim to objectivity in its worldview. How do you, as a philosopher, see the question of political commitment?

FOUCAULT: I do not think that we could give a definition of an intellectual unless we stress the fact that there is no intellectual who is not at the same time, and in some form, involved with politics. Of course, at certain points in history, there have been attempts to define the intellectual from a purely theoretical and objective angle. It is assumed that intellectuals are those who refuse to become involved in the issues and problems of their own societies. But in fact, such periods in history have been very rare, and there are very few intellectuals who have adopted such a premise.

If we look at Western societies, from the very first Greek philosophers up to today's intellectuals, we see that they all had ties in some form to politics. They were involved in politics, and their actions had meaning only insofar as they concretely affected their societies. At any rate, this is a general principle. Therefore, to the question, "Should an intellectual interfere in the political, social, economic life of his or her country," I respond that it is not a matter of should or ought. Being an intellectual requires this. The very definition of an intellectual comprises a person who necessarily is entangled with the politics and major decisions of his society. Thus, the point is not whether or not an intellectual has a presence in political life. Rather, the point is what should the role of an intellectual be in the present state of the world, in order that he or she [*u*]² would reach the most decisive, authentic, accurate results. I am, of course, only dealing with the society of which I am a part. Later, in comparison to your experiences, we shall see what are the differences between our situation in the West and yours.

In France and in Europe in general, ever since the French Revolution, the intellectual has played the role of a prophet, a foreteller of the future society. In other words, the intellectual was one whose responsibility was to deal with general and universal principles for all of humanity. But in our Western societies something important has happened. The role of science, knowledge, technique, and technologies has perpetually increased, and so has the significance of these issues for politics and the organisation of society. Engineers, lawyers, doctors, healthcare workers and social workers, researchers in the humanities, all form a social layer in our society whose numbers, as well as whose economic and political significance, are constantly increasing. Therefore, I think that the role of the intellectual is perhaps not so much, or maybe not only, to stand for the universal values of humanity. Rather, his or her responsibility is to work on specific objective fields, the very fields in which knowledge and sciences are involved, and to analyse and critique the role of knowledge and technique in these areas in our present-day society. In my opinion, today the intellectual must be inside the pit, the very pit in which the sciences are engaged, where they produce political results. Thus, working with intellectuals—mostly doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, and psychologists—has paramount importance to me.

PARHAM: In response to my first question, you also partly answered my second question.

FOUCAULT: No problem, ask it again. Maybe in this way I could answer your first question!

¹ This city is the Shi'ite religious centre of Iran.

² In Persian, the pronoun *u* can be male or female.

PARHAM: Very well. You see, we have witnessed a closeness between philosophy and political reality. I wanted to ask you, with regard to this proximity between philosophy and politics, do you see any basic change in the philosophical worldview of our time? And if so, what is its foundation and its nature?

FOUCAULT: If again we keep in mind the West, I think we should not forget two grand and painful experiences we had in our culture in the last two centuries. First, throughout the eighteenth century, philosophers — or it is better to say, intellectuals in France, England, and Germany — attempted to rethink society anew, according to the vision and principles of good government as they perceived it. The impact of this type of thinking can be seen, to a great extent, in the revolutions and in the social and political changes in France, England, and Germany. In actuality, out of this philosophical vision — the vision of a non-alienated, clear, lucid, and balanced society — industrial capitalism emerged, that is, the harshest, most savage, most selfish, most dishonest, oppressive society one could possibly imagine. I do not want to say that the philosophers were responsible for this, but the truth is that their ideas had an impact on these transformations. More importantly, this monstrosity we call the state is to a great extent the fruit and result of their thinking. Let us not forget that the theory of the state, the theory of the all-powerful state, the all-powerful society vis-à-vis the individual, the absolute right of the group against the right of the individual, can be found among French philosophers of the eighteenth century and the German philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is the first painful experience.

The second painful experience is the one that emerged not between the philosopher and bourgeois society, but between revolutionary thinkers and the socialist states we know today. Out of the visions of Marx, the visions of socialists, from their thoughts and their analyses, which were among the most objective, rational, and seemingly accurate thoughts and analyses, emerged in actuality political systems, social organisations, and economic mechanisms that today are condemned and ought to be discarded. Thus, I think both of these experiences were painful ones, and we are still living through the second one, not just in thought but also in life.

I can give another example that is both most interesting and tragic for Western intellectuals—that of Vietnam and Cambodia. One felt that there was a people's struggle, a struggle that was just and right at its foundation, against vicious American imperialism. One anticipated that out of this remarkable struggle a society would emerge in which one could recognise oneself. By "ourselves," I do not mean the Westerners, since this was not their battle. I mean a society in which the face of revolution could be recognised. But Cambodia, and to some extent Vietnam, present us with a face from which freedom, a classless society, a non-alienating society, were absent.

I think we live at a point of extreme darkness and extreme brightness. Extreme darkness, because we really do not know from which direction the light would come. Extreme brightness, because we ought to have the courage to begin anew. We have to abandon every dogmatic principle and question one by one the validity of all the principles that have been the source of oppression. From the point of view of political thought, we are, so to speak, at point zero. We have to construct another political thought, another political imagination, and teach anew the vision of a future. I am saying this so that you know that any Westerner, any Western intellectual with some integrity, cannot be indifferent to what she or he hears about Iran, a nation that has reached a number of social, political, and so forth, dead ends. At the same time, there are those who struggle to present a different way of thinking about social and political organisation, one that takes nothing from Western philosophy, from its juridical and revolutionary foundations. In other words, they try to present an alternative based on Islamic teachings.

PARHAM: In my first two questions, the topic of discussion was mostly philosophy, science, and especially the humanities. Now, with your permission, I would like to speak of something that is closer to our particular situation in Iran, that is, religion. Could you please tell us what your opinion is of the role of religion as a world perspective and in social and political life?

FOUCAULT: One of the statements I have heard repeatedly during my recent stay in Iran was that Marx was really wrong to say, "Religion is the opium of the people." I think I must have heard this statement three or four times. I do not intend to begin anew a discussion of Marx here, but I do think that we ought to reexamine this statement of Marx. I have heard some supporters of an Islamic government say that this statement of Marx might be true for Christianity, but it is not true for Islam, especially Shi'ite Islam. I have read several books on Islam and Shi'ism, and I totally agree with them because the role of Shi'ism in a political awakening, in maintaining political consciousness, in inciting and fomenting political awareness, is historically undeniable. It is a profound phenomenon in a society such as Iran. Of course, there have at times been

proximities between the state and Shi'ism, and shared organisations have existed. You had a Safavid Shi'ism,³ and against it you have tried to resurrect an Alavid Shi'ism.⁴ All of this is accurate. But on the whole, and despite changes that occurred in the nature of religion due to the proximity between Shi'ism and state power in that period, religion has nevertheless played an oppositional role.

In the Christian centres of the world, the situation is more complicated. Still, it would be naïve and incorrect if we said that religion in its Christian form was the opium of the people, while in its Islamic form it has been a source of popular awakening for the people. I am astonished by the connections and even the similarities that exist between Shi'ism and some of the religious movements in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, up to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. These were great popular movements against feudal lords, against the first cruel formations of bourgeois society, great protests against the all-powerful control of the state. In Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before they adopted a directly political form, all such movements appeared as religious movements. Take for example the Anabaptists, who were allied to such a movement during Germany's Peasant Wars.⁵ It was a movement that rejected the power of the state, government bureaucracy, social and religious hierarchies, everything. This movement supported the right to individual conscience and the independence of small religious groups, which wished to be together, have their own organisations, without hierarchy or social stratification between them. These were all extremely important social movements that left their mark on the religious and political consciousness of the West. In England, during the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth century, underneath the bourgeois and parliamentary revolutions as such, we have a complete series of religious-political struggles. These movements are religious because they are political and political because they are religious, and are very important. I therefore think that the history of religions, and their deep connection to politics, ought to be thought anew.

In actuality, the type of Christianity that was the opium of the people was the product of political choices and joint tactics by the states, or the government bureaucracies, and the church organisation during the nineteenth century. They said we ought to bring the rebellious workers back to religion and make them accept their fate. In Marx's time, religion was in fact the opium of the people, and Marx was right for this reason, but only in the context of his own time. His statement ought to be understood only for the time period in which he lived, not as a general statement on all eras of Christianity, or on all religions.

PARHAM: Precisely. Now I come to my last question, which, unlike my other questions, is more academic. I wanted to use this opportunity to ask you about philosophical structuralism. You have been known as one of the most authentic representatives of this form of thought. Could you please tell me what the issues are exactly?

FOUCAULT: Very well, but let me first say that I am not a structuralist. I never have been. I never made such a claim. And I have always clearly said that I am not a structuralist, but such terms, such labels, are out of necessity both correct and incorrect. There is a truthful dimension to them and an untruthful one. In actuality, what is known as structuralism is a methodology used in linguistics, sociology, history of religions, comparative mythology, and so forth. These make up a group of scientific fields that use the structuralist method. In other words, their analysis is based more on systems of relations than on explorations of elements and contents. Structuralism in this meaning has no relationship to my work, none.

Beyond this, there is the fact that in the 1960s in the West, especially in France, a change took place in the form of analysis and philosophical thinking. Briefly, without wishing to enter a debate, the issue is this: From the time of Descartes until now, the point of origin of philosophical thought was the subject, and the foundational subject of philosophy was to determine what is the subject, what is self-consciousness? Is the

³ The shahs of the Safavid Dynasty (1501–1722) were the first Iranian rulers to make Shi'ism the country's official religion.

⁴ Literally, the Shi'ism of Ali. Imam Ali was Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, as well as the fourth caliph (656–661 CE). This notion of returning to an original, supposedly uncorrupted Shi'ism, for which martyrdom was the supreme virtue, was developed by the lay Muslim theologian Ali Shariati. Shariati, who had a doctorate from the Sorbonne, died in 1977 while living abroad. At the time, the Iranian government was blamed for his sudden death. His writings had a dramatic impact on a whole generation of Iranian activists. At the time of the revolution, his picture was carried alongside that of Khomeini in the demonstrations.

⁵ During the years 1524 to 1534, in the aftermath of Martin Luther's break with Rome, Germany experienced a series of radical peasant revolts, which are the subject of Frederick Engels's *Peasant Wars in Germany* (1852).

subject free? Is self-consciousness absolute self-consciousness? In other words, is it aware of itself? In sum, can self-consciousness, as Hegel said, become worldly?

Around the 1960s, after the world became more connected with technique and technical knowledge, I believe that a rethinking at the point of origin of philosophical thought began. That is, it seemed better to begin with contents, with things themselves. In other words, and very simply, this meant to begin with things that exist positively and to analyse them. It meant to see how the subject could be placed within this content, which is the only role that the subject can play, focusing on how the subject is determined by outside elements. In other words, the principal change is not to privilege the subject as against the objective reality from the very beginning. Rather the objects, the relation between the objects, and the comprehensibility of objects within themselves are what we explore. That is, we pay more attention to the comprehensibility of things in their own right than to the awareness of the subject.

From this point of view, we can understand why some types of research are called structuralist research. For example, look at the problem of psychoanalysis. Lacan tried to discuss the subject on the basis of the unconscious, whereas Sartre and Merleau-Ponty began with subject and tried to see if they could reach the unconscious or not, and they never, of course, reached it. Lacan begins with the unconscious, the principle of the unconscious that appears in the process of psychoanalytical probing, and asks the question: Given the existence of this unconscious, what would the subject be?

Now I turn to myself, since your question was for me. My first book was called *Madness and Civilization*, but in fact my problem was rationality, that is, how does reason operate in a society such as ours? Well, to understand this issue, instead of beginning with the subject moving from awareness to reason, it is better if we see how, in the Western world, those who are not the subjects of reason, those who are not considered reasonable, that is, those who are mad, are removed from the life process. Starting with this practice, with constellations of real practices, and finally, a process of negation, we reach the point where we can see the place of reason. Or we find out that reason is not just the movements and actions of rational structures, but the movements of the structures and the mechanisms of power. Reason is what sets aside madness. Reason is what gives itself the right and the means to set aside madness.

From such analyses that do not start with the subject, I reached the point of how one could question various manifestations of power and analyse them. In general, we can say that a philosophy based on self-consciousness is necessarily related to the idea of freedom. And this is very good, but the philosophy or thinking whose subject matter is not self-consciousness, but real practice or social practice, relates to the theory of power. In other words, instead of self-consciousness and freedom, we reach practice and power.

I do not mean to say that power, from my point of view, is a foundational, unconquerable, absolute entity that one has to kneel before. Rather, the purpose of all of my analyses is that, in light of them, we find out where are the weak points of power, from which we can attack it. When we speak of the relationship between reason and madness, when we show that reason exercises its power on madness, this is not to justify reason. Rather, it is to show how reason as a system of power can be questioned and fought against. Thus, my analyses are in fact strategic analyses and are meaningful only in relation to strategies.

My studies on the issues of youth crime and prison are of a similar nature. I want to show what are the existing mechanisms of power that separate the criminal from the noncriminal. What are the points of weakness of this system or the historic points in between which the system has taken shape, so that we could objectively and practically challenge them? Many regard structuralism as an analysis of mechanisms that are undefeatable and imperishable, whereas the opposite is true. They say that structuralism is about analysing relations that are part of the nature of the objects and cannot be changed. The opposite is true. I want to explain relations that have been tied together through the power of human beings and for this very reason are changeable and destructible. Therefore, from my point of view, structuralism is more a philosophy or a manual of combat, not a document of impotence. My problem is not to explore my self-consciousness to see if I am free or not. My problem is to analyse reality to see how one can free oneself.

The Army — When the Earth Quakes

First published in *Corriere della sera*, September 28, 1978.

Tehran — On the edge of the two great salt deserts that stretch across the middle of Iran, an earthquake has just occurred. Tabas and forty villages have been annihilated.

Ten years ago to the day, Ferdows, in the same region, was wiped out. On this ruined land, two rival towns were born, as if in the shah's Iran the same misfortune could not give rise to the same renewal. On one side, there was the town of administration, the Ministry of Housing, and the notables. But a little further away, the artisans and the farmers rebuilt their own town, in opposition to all these official plans. Under the direction of a cleric, they collected the funds, built and dug with their own hands, laid out canals and wells, and constructed a mosque. On the first day they planted a green flag.⁶ The new village is called Islamiyeh. Facing the government and against it, Islam: already ten years old.

Who will rebuild Tabas today? Who will rebuild Iran after the earthquake of Friday, September 8,⁷ right under the treads of the tanks? The fragile political edifice has not yet fallen to the ground, but it is irreparably cracked from top to bottom.

In the torrid heat, under the only palm trees still standing, the last survivors of Tabas work away at the rubble. The dead are still stretching their arms to hold up walls that no longer exist. Men, their faces turned toward the ground, curse the shah. The bulldozers have arrived, accompanied by the empress; she was ill received. However, mullahs rush in from the entire region; and young people in Tehran go discreetly from one friendly house to another, collecting funds before leaving for Tabas. "Help your brothers, but nothing through the government, nothing for it," is the call that Ayatollah Khomeini has just issued from exile in Iraq.

The earth that shakes and destroys things can also bring men together; it divides the politicians and demarcates the adversaries more clearly than ever. The state believes that it is possible to divert the immense anger from the Black Friday massacre — anger that is now congealed into shock, but not disarmed — toward this natural disaster. It will not succeed. The dead of Tabas will lie down next to the victims of Djaleh Square and make demands on the latter's behalf. A woman posed the question publicly: "Three days of national mourning for the earthquake, that's good; but does it mean that the blood that was shed in Tehran was not Iranian as well?"

In Tehran's hotels, journalists coming back from Tabas the other night were confused. Evidently, the soldiers stood by impassively and let civilian men and women dig up the earth themselves in order to turn up their dead. Instructions? Incompetence? Ill will? The enigma of the army, here as everywhere.

On Monday, September 4, the crowd throws gladiolas at the soldiers; they fraternise and they cry. On Thursday, September 7, the immense demonstration rolls into the streets of Tehran; a few centimetres away from the machine guns, pointed at them but silent. On Friday, September 8, machine guns and perhaps bazookas were fired throughout the day; the troops sometimes had the methodical coldness of a firing squad.

From the first days of Islam, and especially for the Shi'ites ever since the assassination of Ali, the murder of a Muslim by another Muslim — and God knows that this has occurred — still has the impact of a religious scandal, both politically and juridically.

As a stopgap measure, they answered with myth: "Those who fired on us do not belong to our people; they had long hair and spoke a foreign tongue: Israelis, therefore, brought in the day before by cargo planes." I asked an oppositionist, who because of his own situation is very familiar with what happens in the army, about this. "Yes," he responded to me, "there is technical cooperation with the Israeli army; yes, the anti-guerrilla forces had, in the beginning, Israeli advisers; but nothing, absolutely nothing, allows one to say that our dead in Tehran were killed by foreigners."⁸

Is real power now in the hands of the army? The army, for the moment, holds back the immense revolt of the people against the shah, who is abandoned by everyone, even the privileged. In the coming weeks, will the army be a decisive force, as many Western observers are saying?

⁶ The green flag represents Islam.

⁷ On Friday, September 8, "Black Friday," the army massacred several hundred protestors at Djaleh Square in Tehran. The Tabas earthquake happened a few days later.

⁸ This unfounded rumour suggested that Iran's mainly Muslim army had not really carried out the September 8 massacre.

It seems not. Iran has what is apparently the fifth largest army in the world. One out of every three dollars of its oil revenue is dedicated to this precious toy. However, a budget, good equipment, jet fighters, and hovercrafts — this is not yet an army. It is sometimes even the case that arms hamper the formation of an army.

First, there is not *one* army in Iran, but four: the traditional army,⁹ responsible for the tasks of surveillance and administration for the whole territory; the shah's Praetorian guard, a closed body of Janissaries,¹⁰ with its recruitment, its schools, its living quarters, some of which were constructed by a French company; the combat army,¹¹ with armaments that are sometimes more sophisticated than those available to the American army. And then thirty or forty thousand American advisors.

Furthermore, they were careful not to create something that would resemble a veritable general staff. Each one of the principal units of these armies is directly linked to the shah. An internal police controls them. No high-ranking officer can move about without the personal authorisation of the shah: "One of my colleagues," one of them said to me, "had reproached the shah for having gotten himself named a general in the English army; he thought that this time the gewgaw [*hochet*]¹² felt a little too much like something from the Victorian age. This man, who had supported the shah against Mossadeq,¹³ found himself in prison for three years."

In the Iran of oil and poverty, the army occupies a very important place. Four million people (one out of six Iranians) live off of it, according to economists. But this is not enough to give it a coherent social base, or even to oblige it to participate in economic development. Most of its weaponry is purchased abroad. There are of course economic consequences. For the generals, these include commissions on contracts. At the lowest level, the military is a small manual labor force recruited largely from among the unemployed. Iran lacks a solid economic-military structure.

Nor is there an army ideology. Never in the history of Iran has the army been allowed to take on the role of moulding the nation or of developing the type of political project that can be found in the South American armies since the wars of independence. The Iranian army has never liberated anything. It has been marked successively with Russian, English, and then American insignia. The army protected its rulers and stood guard side by side with foreign troops, around the foreign concessions. It never had the opportunity to identify with Iran. Nor did it want to take charge of the country's destiny. One day a general seized power, but he commanded the Cossack legion and was pushed forward by the English. He was the father of the current king.¹⁴

Of course, things can happen again. The American ambassador can replay the Ironside *coup* that allowed Reza Khan to substitute himself for the Qajars,¹⁵ or at least impose an iron-handed general on the shah as prime minister. But this would only be a temporary solution. It would not be a military dictatorship under the direction of a caste of officers showing internal solidarity despite personal rivalries. The Pinochet or Videla formulas seem to be off the agenda.¹⁶

Thank heavens.

Let us say, thanks to Allah.

⁹ The traditional army was based on universal male conscription, similar in some ways to a national guard.

¹⁰ The Praetorian Guard were the bodyguards of the Roman emperors; the Janissaries were elite slave soldiers recruited by the Ottoman sultans from among Balkan Christian boys. Foucault was in fact referring to the shah's Immortals (*Gard-i Javidan*), an elite unit of royal bodyguards named after an earlier one from the pre-Islamic period.

¹¹ The combat army was composed of professional career soldiers, separate from the traditional army.

¹² This could also be translated as "toy rattle" and refers to ridiculous or childish behaviour.

¹³ In August 1953, the United States and the British helped organize a coup that overthrew the democratic and nationalist government of Muhammad Mossadeq, restoring Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to absolute power.

¹⁴ The reference is to Reza Shah Pahlavi, who reigned from 1925 to 1941. A member of the British-led Cossack Brigade, he carried out a successful coup in 1921 with the support of the British. In 1925, the *majlis* (parliament) disbanded the Qajar dynasty, which had ruled since 1795, and Reza Shah (formerly Reza Khan) became the first monarch of the Pahlavi dynasty.

¹⁵ This refers to Major Edmund Ironside, commander of the British forces in Iran in 1921.

¹⁶ The brutal dictator General Augusto Pinochet took power in Chile in 1973 with U.S. support, ousting the democratically elected Marxist government of Salvador Allende; his counterpart General Jorge Videla held power in Argentina from 1976 to 1982.

One day, twenty-four Iranian officers were executed for communism. The next day, the shah laid down his crown at the feet of a statue of Lenin. The victims of the earlier bloodbath were never replaced.¹⁷

The army's anti-Marxism stems from two sources. Among those who are inclined toward the opposition, it is justified by the Soviet Union's policies and its at least tacit support, since the fall of Mossadeq, of the shah's policies. A lot of physical, intellectual, and moral courage would be necessary today in order to be a nationalist oppositionist and at the same time a Soviet-type Marxist. For these people, anti-Marxism undergirds nationalism. And for the simple-minded, there is of course government propaganda. I was shown internal army circulars that said one must never kill women or children, except of course if they are communists.

Because it is so solidly anti-Marxist, is it not possible that the army would intervene forcefully in national life, as unrest spreads and as the government blames this unrest on "international communism"?

Some friends arranged for me, in a well-scrubbed place on the outskirts of Tehran, a meeting with high-ranking officers, all from the opposition.

The more the disturbances increase, they told me, the more the government, in an attempt to maintain order, is being forced to call on soldiers who lack both training and the willingness to follow orders. And these troops have the opportunity to discover that they are not dealing with international communism, but rather with the street, with the bazaar merchants, with workers, with the unemployed, men like their brothers, as they themselves would be if they were not soldiers: "We can make them shoot once, but not twice; in Tabriz eight months ago,¹⁸ it was necessary to change the entire garrison; and even though we brought regiments to Tehran from remote corners of the provinces, it will still be necessary to change them rapidly." It was confirmed to me that on Black Friday at least one officer had been killed by his soldiers when he gave the order to shoot at the crowd, and also that some of the soldiers had committed suicide the next day.

As agitation develops under the banner of this Islam, to which the whole army adheres,¹⁹ the soldiers and the officers discover that they do not have enemies in front of them, but rather masters above them. And when an army learns, at the moment of combat, that instead of enemies it has masters, what does it do?

"Does not a Nasser or a Qaddafi emerge from its ranks?"

The officer hesitates a second.

"If this Qaddafi is patriotic, legalist, democratic, and religious, I would accept him, and I believe that we would accept him."

"Yes, of course, he would be all of that on the day he comes to power. But the next day?"

"As popular as he is, his popularity would cease at the very instant that he became a dictator."

And he added: "Do not forget that there is nothing in the army that is intended to make it popular. We would accept a democratic leader that would emerge from it, but not a dictatorship emanating from it."

I remembered, then, what lots of others had said to me, that the large size of the Iranian army could not be justified by national defence. Apparently, it would be swept away by a Soviet attack within eight minutes. Its sole task, according to this hypothesis, would be to practice a scorched-earth strategy — in other words, to destroy the country. Therefore, such a disproportionately large force only has meaning insofar as it ensures internal order or policing at the regional level. One of its most recent military interventions was in Afghanistan shortly after the coup d'état.²⁰ It has the potential to attack from the rear the entire battlefield of the Middle East. It is a regional intervention force throughout Southwest Asia. In short, it is too brittle and divided to impose, with or without the shah, the American order in Iran; it is also a gendarme that is too obviously turned against its Muslim neighbours to ensure, with widespread agreement, a national "restoration." It is a question of troops equipped in the American manner, but not of an Americanised army.

¹⁷ In 1955, twenty-seven officers linked to the banned pro-Soviet Tudeh Party were executed, but in 1956, the shah was invited to the Soviet Union for an official visit.

¹⁸ The unrest started in Qom in February 1978, when soldiers killed several *talabehs* (seminarians), who were demonstrating against a scurrilous letter in the newspaper *Etela'at* attacking Khomeini. It soon spread to Tabriz.

¹⁹ While predominantly Muslim, the army included non-Muslims as well.

²⁰ In April 1978, Afghanistan's ruler General Muhammad Daud was overthrown and killed in an uprising by the pro-Soviet People's Democratic Party.

I asked one of these army representatives what, according to him, was the biggest danger to Iran: the United States or the USSR. This time he said, without any hesitation:

“The United States, because it is the Americans who are dominating us.”

To me, these words seemed to carry a lot of weight, because I knew that the man to whom I was talking had been far from hostile to the actions of the Americans twenty-five years earlier, when they restored the shah to the throne.

The army does not seem, therefore, to have within it the power to carry out a political intervention. It is true that the shah cannot subsist without it, but it is besieged, or rather crisscrossed, by forces that threaten *him*.

It can permit or block a solution, but it can neither propose nor impose one that it develops itself. It is a keyhole instead of a key. And of the two keys that claim to be able to turn it, the one that seems the best adapted at the moment is not the American one of the shah. It is the Islamic one of the people’s [*populaire*]²¹ movement.

²¹ The French term *populaire*, often counterposed to *bourgeois*, has several meanings, among them “popular,” “of the people,” “of the common people,” and “people’s.” It became part of communist ideology in the sense, for example, of “people’s war” (*guerre populaire*) as applied by Mao Zedong to his guerrilla campaigns in China. It was also used to refer to what were termed the “people’s democracies” (*démocraties populaires*) of Eastern Europe.

The Shah is a Hundred Years Behind the Times
First published in *Corriere della sera*, October 1, 1978.²²

Tehran—When I left Paris, I was told over and over again: “Iran is going through a crisis of modernisation. An arrogant monarch, clumsy and authoritarian, is attempting to compete with the industrialised nations and to keep his eyes fixed on the year 2000, but the traditional society, for its part, cannot and does not want to follow. Wounded and hurt, it comes to a halt. It folds itself back onto its own past and, in the name of millenarian beliefs, it seeks shelter among a retrograde clergy.”

How many times have I also heard intelligent observers ask with all seriousness what political form will be able to reconcile the deepest layers of Iranian society with the country’s needed modernisation. Would that be a liberal monarchy, a parliamentary system, or a strong presidential one?

I arrived in Tehran with these questions in mind. I have asked them twenty times and I have received twenty responses: “Let the king reign, but not govern.” “Let us go back to the 1906 Constitution.”²³ “Let us establish a regency for a while, before making definitive decisions.” “The shah must totally or partially step back.” “The Pahlavis should leave the country and never be heard from again.” But always, underlying all these responses, there is the same *leitmotif*: “At any rate, we want nothing from *this regime*.” I have advanced very little.

One morning, in a big empty apartment where closed curtains let through only the almost unbearable noise of the cars passing by, I met an oppositionist who was described to me as one of the country’s astute political minds. He was wanted by the police. He was a very calm, very reserved man. He made few gestures, but when he opened his hand, one could see large scars. He had already had encounters with the police.

- Why do you fight?
- To bring down despotism and corruption.
- Despotism first, or corruption?
- Despotism sustains corruption, and corruption supports despotism.
- What do you think of the idea, often put forward by the shah’s entourage, that it is necessary to have a strong power in order to modernise a still backward country, that modernisation cannot help but lead to corruption in a country that lacks a cohesive administration?
- The modernisation-despotism-corruption combination is precisely what we reject.
- In short, that is how you characterise “this regime.”
- Exactly.

A small detail that struck me the day before when I visited the bazaar, which had just reopened after a strike that had lasted more than eight days, suddenly came back to me. Incredible sewing machines, high and misshapen, as can be seen in the advertisements of nineteenth-century newspapers, were lined up in the stalls. They were adorned with patterns of ivy, climbing plants, and budding flowers, roughly imitating old Persian miniatures. These unfit-for-use Western objects, under the sign of an obsolete Orient, all bore the inscription: “Made in South Korea.”

I then felt that I had understood that recent events did not signify a shrink- ing back in the face of modernisation by extremely retrograde elements, but the rejection, by a whole culture and a whole people, of a *modernisation* that is itself an *archaism*.

The shah’s misfortune is to have espoused this archaism. His crime is to have maintained, through a corrupt and despotic system, that fragment of the past in a present that no longer wants it.

Yes, modernisation as a political project and as a principle of social transformation is a thing of the past in Iran.

I do not mean that mere mistakes and failures have doomed the recent forms that the shah wanted to give to modernisation. It is true that all the great efforts undertaken by the regime since 1963 are now

²² According to the editors of *Dits et écrits*, the title proposed by Foucault was “The Dead Weight of Modernization.” This article was almost immediately translated into Persian and pasted on the walls of Tehran University.

²³ The 1906–11 Constitutional Revolution established a strong parliament within a constitutional monarchy. The Constitution, which included the principle of equality before the law of all male citizens, continues even today to be a point of reference for many nationalists, liberals, and leftists.

rejected, by all social classes.²⁴ It is not only the big property owners who are discontented with the agrarian reform, but also the small peasants, who fall into debt as soon as they are granted a parcel of land, and are then forced to emigrate to the city. The artisans and the small manufacturers are discontented, because the creation of an internal market benefited mainly foreign products.²⁵ The bazaar merchants are discontented because the current forms of urbanisation suffocate them. The wealthy classes, who counted on a certain level of national industrial development and who can now only imitate the governing caste by placing their capital in California banks or in Parisian real estate, are also discontented.

“Modernisation,” which is no longer desired, is this series of stinging failures. But “modernisation” is also something older that sticks to the current monarch, and that is his *raison d’être*. It is something that is the basis not only of his government, but also of his dynasty.

In 1921, when Reza Khan, the head of the Cossack Brigade, was brought to power by the English, he presented himself as a disciple of Atatürk.²⁶ No doubt this was a usurpation of the throne, but he also had three objectives borrowed from Mustafa Kemal: nationalism, secularism, and modernisation. The Pahlavis were never able to reach the first two objectives. As to nationalism, they neither could, nor knew how to, loosen the constraints of geopolitics and oil wealth. The father placed himself under English domination in order to stave off the Russian threat. The son substituted American political, economic, and military control for the English presence and for Soviet penetration. For secularism, things were equally difficult. Because it was the Shi’ite religion that in fact constituted the real principle of national consciousness, Reza Shah, in order to dissociate the two, tried to propagate a notion of “Aryanness,” whose sole support was the myth of Aryan purity that reigned elsewhere. In the eyes of the people, what did it mean to discover one fine day that they were Aryans? It was nothing more than seeing the two-thousand-year-old monarchy being celebrated today on the ruins of Persepolis.

Out of the whole Kemalist program, international politics and the internal situation left to the Pahlavis only one bone to chew on, that of modernisation. This modernisation is now utterly rejected, not only because of the setbacks that have been experienced, but also because of its very principle. With the present agony of the regime, we witness the last moments of an episode that started almost sixty years ago, the attempt to modernise the Islamic countries in a European fashion. The shah still clings to this as if it were his sole *raison d’être*. I do not know if he is still looking toward the year 2000,²⁷ but I do know that his famous gaze dates from the 1920s.²⁸

There are in Iran as in Europe certain technocrats, whose function is to correct the errors of the previous generation of technocrats. They speak of measured growth, of development, but also of the environment. They speak of the social fabric with respect. One of them explained to me that everything could still be straightened out, that a “reasonable” modernisation could occur, which would take “cultural identity” into account, but on condition that the king abandon his dreams. Turning around, he showed me a huge photo on the wall where a small, disguised man was strutting in front of a gem-studded throne, as a way of saying, in the manner of de Tocqueville: “This is the man with whom we will have to govern Iran.”

²⁴ Foucault was referring to the shah’s “White Revolution” of 1963, which initiated a limited land reform program and women’s suffrage, but no opening toward democracy. Khomeini led his first political campaign against the referendum supporting the shah’s program, which passed in any case. The shah reacted by attacking the theological seminary where Khomeini was based. In an attempt to save Khomeini’s life, several Grand Ayatollahs declared that Khomeini was a recognised theologian, one who merited the title of ayatollah. The shah then exiled Khomeini to Iraq, where he lived until 1978.

²⁵ In this form of what the Left considered to be dependent development, the internal market purchased commodities that had been manufactured abroad rather than at home.

²⁶ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) was a World War I military leader and founder of modern Turkey. During his years in power, 1923–38, he established the most secular political system ever created in a predominantly Muslim country.

²⁷ According to Muhammad Reza Shah, by 2000, Iran was to have joined the “great civilisations” of the world.

²⁸ This is a reference to the shah’s father. There are numerous accounts of Reza Shah’s terrifying gaze, his incessant control of all details, and of his summary arrest and execution of those he regarded as personal enemies, or whom he deemed irresponsible and capricious in matters of state. “Gaze” is the same term that Foucault used in his well-known discussion of power in the form of “hierarchical observation” in *Discipline and Punish*: “The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly” (1977a, 173).

Even now, this ambitious man and several others with him would like to continue to save “modernisation” by limiting the shah’s powers and by neutralising his dreams. They have not understood that in Iran today it is modernisation that is a dead weight.

I have always regretted that corruption, which attracts so many unscrupulous people, interests honest people so little. Do you know of a treatise on political economy, or of sociology or history books, that offers a serious and detailed analysis of the speculation, corrupt practices, embezzlement, and swindling that constitute the veritable daily bread of our trade, our industry, and our finances?

In Tehran, I at last met my man, an austere economist with malicious eyes.

“No,” he told me, “corruption was not the misfortune that compromised the country’s development, nor has it been the dynasty’s weakness. It has always been the dynasty’s way of exercising power and a fundamental mechanism of the economy. Corruption is what held despotism and modernisation together. Please consider that it is not a vice that is more or less hidden. It is the *regime*.”

I then had the privilege of hearing a superb presentation on “Pahlavi corruption.” The clever professor knew a lot. By birth, he was well enough connected to the traditional wealth of his country to be familiar with the old-time ruses, and his expertise had helped him to understand today’s procedures well.

He showed me how Reza Shah, this unknown who came to power with only foreign support, had immediately inscribed himself on the economy of the country as a result of predatory conquests — confiscation of a few great feudal treasures and then of great stretches of fertile land on the shores of the Caspian. He then explained to me the system of the current team. They use modern methods, such as government loans, banking associations, lending institutions such as the Pahlavi Foundation,²⁹ as well as very archaic forms, where it is a question of concessions granted to a family member, of revenues accorded to a favourite: “To one of the brothers, the real estate; to the twin sister, the drug traffic; to her son, the trade in antiquities; the sugar to Félix Agaian; the arms trade to Toufanian; the caviar for Davalou.”³⁰ Even the pistachio trade was parcelled out. All this “modernisation” has led to a gigantic appropriation. Thanks to the Omran bank, the benefits of the agrarian reform ended up in the hands of the shah and of his family. New construction projects in Tehran were distributed like spoils.

A very small clan of beneficiaries weaves the right of conquest into the initiatives of economic development. If we add that the government disposes of the whole oil revenue left to it by foreign companies, that it can therefore acquire “its” police, “its” army, and sign fabulous and fruitful contracts with Westerners, how could we not understand that the Iranian people see in the Pahlavis a regime of occupation? It is a regime that has the same form and comes from the same age as all the colonial regimes that have subjugated Iran since the beginning of the century.

Therefore, I beg of you, do not tell us any more about the fortunes and misfortunes of a monarch who is too modern for a country that is too old. What is old here in Iran is the shah. He is fifty years old and a hundred years behind the times. He is of the age of the predatory monarchs. He has the old-fashioned dream of opening his country through secularisation and industrialisation. Today, it is his project of modernisation, his despotic weapons, and his system of corruption that are archaic. It is “the regime” that is the archaism.

²⁹ An ostensibly charitable organisation supported by public and private contributions, the Pahlavi Foundation became enormously wealthy by the 1970s. In September 1978, under pressure from critics, the government launched an investigation into its finances.

³⁰ Foucault is probably referring to Gholamreza Pahlavi (the shah’s brother), Ashraf Pahlavi (the shah’s sister), and Ashraf’s son Shahram Shafiq. Princess Ashraf once successfully sued *Le Monde* after it published an article suggesting that she was engaged in drug trafficking. Felix Agaian was a senator representing the Armenian minority and a close confidant of the shah. Hasan Toufanian was an air force general who pocketed illegal monies from arms contracts. He became vice-minister of defence during the revolutionary upheavals. Davalou Qajar was a good friend of the shah, who in the late 1970s was accused of illegal drug trading by the Swiss government. The shah secretly whisked him out of Switzerland in his private plane, creating a scandal in the European press.

Tehran: Faith Against the Shah

First published in *Corriere della sera*, October 8, 1978.³¹

Tehran—Tehran is divided in two, along a horizontal axis. The wealthy part of the city, in the middle of enormous construction sites, slowly climbs the foothills, toward the cool air. The villas with their gardens are enclosed by high walls and solid metal doors. In the south are the bazaar, the old city centre, and the poor suburbs. At the periphery, very low, barrack-type buildings blend dustily into the plains, as far as the eye can see. A little further away, the city collapses, for over the centuries, enormous excavations have been dug for the clay needed to build Tehran. Five or six hundred meters below the level of the royal palace and the Hilton Hotel, the city left its empty moulds. Here, above the holes, red and black tarps have been stretched to create dwellings.

There, where the city ends and where one can already feel the desert, two opposite waves have met, peasants forced from their homes because of the failure of agrarian reform and city dwellers forced out because of the triumphs of urbanisation. This is a phenomenon that characterises the whole of Iran, for in ten years the urban population has increased from nine to seventeen million.

Today, like every Friday, the two halves of the city, side by side during the week, have separated. The North went further north, toward the beaches of the Caspian. The South went further south, toward Shahr-e Rey and the old sanctuary where the [great-grand-]son of Imam Reza lies.³² All around the mausoleum there is stamping and jostling. The European is probably wrong to seek to discern what part is village fair and what part devotion. The present monarch has tried indeed to harness some of this current. Very close to here, he erected the tomb of his own father. The father, Reza Shah, also laid out a large avenue and designed concrete platforms where there had been only vegetable gardens. He threw parties and received foreign delegations, all for naught, for in the rivalry between the dead, the [great-grand-]son of the imam wins, every Friday, over the father of the king.

“At this point, what else do they have left?” is a frequent question. “They have been cut off from their traditional existence. To be sure, their life was narrow and precarious. However, by tearing them away from their farms and their workshops, by promising them a salary that can only be found in earth-moving or construction (and this only sporadically), one exposes them to permanent unemployment. Displaced in this manner, what refuge do they have except the one they can find in the mosque and the religious community?”

But those who stay at home undergo a similar but unseen “transplantation.” There are attempts to develop agribusiness where there used to be individual plots of land. There are attempts to create export crops, while products that used to be farmed onsite are now imported. There are attempts to put new administrative structures in place. Several months ago, on a deserted road, a sign welcomed arriving motorists to Meybod. One searched in vain, but there was no trace of Meybod. People of the area, when questioned, did not understand what was being asked. This inquiry revealed that a town that existed only for bureaucrats had been created from five scattered hamlets, undoubtedly for some land speculator. At the moment, no one yet cared about this city, which was thrown on the ground like a rootless geography,³³ but soon these people were going to be governed differently, forced to live otherwise, connected to each other by other relations, and maybe displaced.

Where can protection be sought, how can what one is be found, if not in this Islam, which for centuries has regulated everyday life, family ties, and social relations with such care? Have not its rigour and its immobility constituted its good fortune? A sociologist told me of its “value as a refuge.”³⁴ It seems to me, however, that this man, who knew his country well, erred (out of discretion, perhaps, in front of the European that I am) by an excessive Westernness.

³¹ According to the editors of *Dits et écrits*, the title proposed by Foucault was “Waiting for the Imam.” His discussion of Shi’ism was informed by a meeting with the Grand Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari in the religious city of Qom on September 20, 1978. Shariatmadari was the most important Shi’ite cleric inside Iran during the time Khomeini was in exile. More moderate than Khomeini, he was edged aside after 1979 and placed under house arrest.

³² Imam Ali Al-Reza was the eighth Shi’ite Imam (765–818 CE).

³³ This suggested the notion of a geographer simply drawing lines on a map as part of a development plan, without taking account of local particularities or sensibilities.

³⁴ Probably a reference to Ehsan Naraghi, whom Foucault visited in Iran, having known him previously in Paris.

Let us remember that the commemoration of the victims of the uprising took place eight days ago in Tehran's immense cemetery, which carries the name "Paradise."³⁵ Where the dead sleep in shallow ground under a thin layer of cement, the families, the friends of the dead, and people by the thousands were praying. They wailed, raising up their arms. But early in the afternoon, around the black and grey robes of the mullahs, discussion had already begun, and with such violence! Overthrow the shah, immediately or later? Chase out the Americans, but how? Take up arms or keep waiting? Support or denounce the opposition deputies who, by attacking the regime in parliament, give the world the impression that freedom is back? Late in the evening, groups formed, broke apart, and re-formed around the clerics. In the political excitement, the dead were not forgotten, but given the veneration to which they were entitled.

Moreover, eight days earlier, thousands of demonstrators, bare-handed in front of armed soldiers, had streamed into the streets of Tehran, shouting "Islam, Islam!"; "Soldier, my brother, why shoot your brother? Come with us to save the Quran"; "Khomeini, heir to Hussein, Khomeini, we follow in your footsteps." And I know more than one student, "left-wing" according to our categories, who had written in big letters, "Islamic Government," on the placard on which he had written his demands and that he was holding up with outstretched arms.

It is necessary to go back even further. Throughout this whole year, revolt ran throughout Iran, from celebrations to commemorations, from worship, to sermons, to prayers. Tehran honoured the dead of Abadan, Tabriz those of Isfahan, and Isfahan those of Qom. White, red, and green lanterns were lit up after nightfall on big tree branches in front of hundreds of houses.³⁶ It was the "wedding bed" of the boys just killed.³⁷ In the mosques during the day, the mullahs spoke furiously against the shah, the Americans, and the West and its materialism. They called for people to fight against the entire regime in the name of the Quran and of Islam. When the mosques became too small for the crowd, loudspeakers were put in the streets. These voices, as terrible as must have been that of Savonarola in Florence, the voices of the Anabaptists in Münster, or those of the Presbyterians at the time of Cromwell,³⁸ resounded through the whole village, the whole neighbourhood. Many of these sermons were recorded, and the tapes circulated throughout Iran. In Tehran, a writer who was not at all a religious man let me listen to some of them. They seemed to evoke neither withdrawal nor a refuge. Nor did they evoke disarray or fear.

I did not even have to ask him whether this religion, which alternately summons the faithful to battle and commemorates the fallen, is not profoundly fascinated with death — more focused, perhaps, on martyrdom than on victory. I knew that he would have responded: "What preoccupies you, you Westerners, is *death*. You ask her to detach you from life, and she teaches you how to give up. As for us, we care about *the dead*, because they attach us to life. We hold out our hands to them in order for them to link us to the permanent obligation of justice. They speak to us of right and of the struggle that is necessary for right to triumph."

Do you know the phrase that makes the Iranians sneer the most, the one that seems to them the stupidest, the shallowest? "Religion is the opium of the people."³⁹ Up to the time of the current dynasty, the mullahs preached with a gun at their side in the mosques.

Around 90 percent of Iranians are Shi'ites. They await the return of the Twelfth Imam, who will create the reign of the true order of Islam on earth.⁴⁰ While this creed does not announce each day that the great event will occur tomorrow, neither does it accept indefinitely all the misery of the world. When I met Ayatollah Shariatmadari (he is undoubtedly the highest spiritual authority in Iran today), one of the first sentences he uttered to me was: "We are waiting for the Mahdi, but each day we fight for a good

³⁵ This is the Paradise of Zahra Cemetery (Behest-e Zahra), at that time in an oasis in the desert about five miles south of Tehran.

³⁶ White, red, and green are Iran's national colours.

³⁷ In Islamic communities, there is a tradition of making a "wedding chamber" (*hajleh*) for unmarried boys who have died. Typically, it contains a large glass box decorated with pictures of the dead, lots of flowers, and lights.

³⁸ Besides the seventeenth-century English Revolution of Oliver Cromwell, Foucault was here referring to the fifteenth-century Italian religious leader Girolamo Savonarola and the radical Protestant peasant uprising of the early sixteenth century in Münster.

³⁹ This is a reference to Marx's famous statement (1843, 175).

⁴⁰ The Twelfth, or Hidden, Imam is the Mahdi, or Messiah, whose concealment gives meaning to the Shi'ite esoteric and mystical tradition, as against the more statist Sunni one.

government.” Shi’ism, in the face of the established powers, arms the faithful with an unremitting restlessness. It breathes into them an ardor wherein the political and the religious lie side by side.

First, it is a matter of belief. For the Shi’ites, the Quran is just because it expresses the will of God, but God himself wanted to be just. It is justice that made law and not law that manufactured justice. Of course, one must find this justice in “the” text dictated by God to the Prophet. However, one can also decipher it in the life, the sayings, the wisdom, and the exemplary sacrifices of the imams, born, after Ali, in the house of the Prophet,⁴¹ and persecuted by the corrupt government of the caliphs, these arrogant aristocrats who had forgotten the old egalitarian system of justice. While also waiting for the Twelfth Imam, who, by becoming visible, will reestablish the egalitarian system in its perfection, it is necessary, through knowledge, through the love of Ali and of his descendants, and even through martyrdom, to defend the community of believers against the evil power.

Consequently, it is a matter of organisation. Among the Shi’ite clergy, religious authority is not determined by a hierarchy. One follows only the one to whom one wants to listen. The Grand Ayatollahs of the moment, those who, in facing down the king, his police, and the army, have just caused an entire people to come out into the streets, were not enthroned by anybody. They were *listened to*. This is true even in the smallest communities, where neighbourhood and village mullahs gather around themselves those attracted by their words. From these volunteers comes their subsistence, from them comes what is necessary to support the disciples they train, and from them comes their influence. But from them also comes the unrelenting plea to denounce injustice, to criticise the government, to rise up against unacceptable measures, and to mete out blame and to prescribe. These men of religion are like so many photographic plates on which the anger and the aspirations of the community are marked. If they wanted to go against the current, they would lose this power, which essentially resides in the interplay of speaking and listening.

Let us not embellish things. The Shi’ite clergy is not a revolutionary force. Since the seventeenth century, it has administered the official religion. The mosques and the tombs of the saints have received valuable donations. Considerable goods have been accumulated in its hands, leading to conflicts as well as complicities with the people in power. This has also led to many oscillations, even if it is true that the mullahs, especially the most humble ones, have been most often on the side of the rebels. For example, Ayatollah Kashani was at the peak of his popularity during the time that he supported Mossadeq. After he changed sides, he was forgotten.⁴²

The mullahs are not at all “revolutionary,” even in the populist sense of the term. But this does not mean that the weight of inertia is the only thing that the Shi’ite religion can put forth in opposition to the government and to the detested modernisation. This does not mean that it constitutes an ideology that is so widespread among the people that true revolutionaries are forced for a time to join it. It is much more than a simple vocabulary through which aspirations, unable to find other words, must pass. It is today what it was several times in the past, the form that the political struggle takes as soon as it mobilises the common people. It transforms thousands of forms of discontent, hatred, misery, and despair into a *force*. It transforms them into a force because it is a form of expression, a mode of social relations, a supple and widely accepted elemental organisation, a way of being together, a way of speaking and listening, something that allows one to be listened to by others, and to yearn for something with them at the same time as they yearn for it.

Persia has had a surprising destiny. At the dawn of history, it invented the state and government. It conferred its models of state and government on Islam, and its administrators staffed the Arab Empire. But from this same Islam, it derived a religion that, throughout the centuries, never ceased to give an irreducible [*irréductible*]⁴³ strength to everything from the depths of a people that can oppose state power.

⁴¹ These are the sons and grandsons of Ali who, together with him, form the twelve imams (saints) of Shi’ite Islam.

⁴² Ayatollah Abulqasem Kashani turned against Mossadeq shortly before the 1953 coup, which he may have helped to facilitate.

⁴³ This could also be translated as “uncompromising” or “stubborn.”

What Are the Iranians Dreaming [*Rêvent*] About?

First published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 16–22, 1978.⁴⁴

“They will never let go of us of their own will. No more than they did in Viet- nam.” I wanted to respond that they are even less ready to let go of you than Vietnam because of oil, because of the Middle East. Today they seem ready, after Camp David,⁴⁵ to concede Lebanon to Syrian domination and therefore to Soviet influence, but would the United States be ready to deprive itself of a position that, according to circumstance, would allow them to intervene from the East or to monitor the peace?

Will the Americans push the shah toward a new trial of strength, a second “Black Friday”? The recommencement of classes at the university, the recent strikes, the disturbances that are beginning once again, and next month’s religious festivals, could create such an opportunity. The man with the iron hand is Moghadam, the current leader of the SAVAK.⁴⁶

This is the backup plan, which for the moment is neither the most desirable nor the most likely. It would be uncertain: While some generals could be counted on, it is not clear if the army could be. From a certain point of view, it would be useless, for there is no “communist threat”: not from outside, since it has been agreed for the past twenty-five years that the USSR would not lay a hand on Iran; not from inside, because hatred for the Americans is equaled only by fear of the Soviets.

Whether advisers to the shah, American experts, regime technocrats, or groups from the political opposition (be they the National Front or more “socialist-oriented” men),⁴⁷ during these last weeks everyone has agreed with more or less good grace to attempt an “accelerated internal liberalisation,” or to let it occur. At present, the Spanish model is the favourite of the political leadership.⁴⁸ Is it adaptable to Iran? There are many technical problems. There are questions concerning the date: Now, or later, after another violent incident? There are questions concerning individual persons: With or without the shah? Maybe with the son, the wife? Is not former prime minister Amini,⁴⁹ the old diplomat pegged to lead the operation, already worn out?

The King and the Saint

There are substantial differences between Iran and Spain, however. The failure of economic development in Iran prevented the laying of a basis for a liberal, modern, westernised regime. Instead, there arose an immense movement from below, which exploded this year, shaking up the political parties that were being slowly reconstituted. This movement has just thrown half a million men into the streets of Tehran, up against machine guns and tanks.

Not only did they shout, “Death to the Shah,” but also “Islam, Islam, Khomeini, We Will Follow You,” and even “Khomeini for King.”

The situation in Iran can be understood as a great joust under traditional emblems, those of the king and the saint, the armed ruler and the destitute exile, the despot faced with the man who stands up bare-

⁴⁴ This was the first of Foucault’s articles on Iran to appear in French. There are two French verbs for “to dream,” *rêver* and *songer*. The former conveys the sense of dreaming as something emotional or spontaneous, and is related to the English word “reverie.” In the latter, dreaming is something based more on thought and reflection.

⁴⁵ This is a reference to the Camp David Accords of September 1978, signed by Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, with the mediation of U.S. president Jimmy Carter. Egypt became the first Arab state to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, but nothing concrete was done concerning the rights of the Palestinians.

⁴⁶ General Nasser Moghadam was appointed head of the SAVAK, the regime’s notorious political police, in 1978. He was executed in 1979.

⁴⁷ The National Front, which was founded in October 1949, was a secular nationalist party claiming the legacy of Mossadeq. In 1978 Karim Sanjabi represented the party.

⁴⁸ After the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, Spain made a rapid and relatively peaceful transition from fascist dictatorship to constitutional monarchy. The first free elections in forty years were held in 1977, when leftist parties won a parliamentary majority.

⁴⁹ Ali Amini was a moderate politician, considered to be close to the United States. In September of 1978, he advised the shah to step back from direct governance and to allow a coalition government uniting all the opposition parties to take over.

handed and is acclaimed by a people. This image has its own power, but it also speaks to a reality to which millions of dead have just subscribed.⁵⁰

The notion of a rapid liberalisation without a rupture in the power structure presupposes that the movement from below is being integrated into the system, or that it is being neutralised. Here, one must first discern where and how far the movement intends to go. However, yesterday in Paris, where he had sought refuge, and in spite of many pressures, Ayatollah Khomeini “ruined it all.”

He sent out an appeal to the students, but he was also addressing the Muslim community and the army, asking that they oppose in the name of the Quran and in the name of nationalism these compromises concerning elections, a constitution, and so forth.

Is a long-foreseen split taking place within the opposition to the shah? The “politicians” of the opposition try to be reassuring: “It is good,” they say. “Khomeini, by raising the stakes, reinforces us in the face of the shah and the Americans. Anyway, his name is only a rallying cry, for he has no program. Do not forget that, since 1963, political parties have been muzzled.⁵¹ At the moment, we are rallying to Khomeini, but once the dictatorship is abolished, all this mist will dissipate. Authentic politics will take command, and we will soon forget the old preacher.” But all the agitation this weekend around the hardly clandestine residence of the ayatollah in the suburbs of Paris, as well as the coming and going of “important” Iranians, all of this contradicted this somewhat hasty optimism. It all proved that people believed in the power of the mysterious current that flowed between an old man who had been exiled for fifteen years and his people, who invoke his name.

The nature of this current has intrigued me since I learned about it a few months ago, and I was a little weary, I must confess, of hearing so many clever experts repeating: “We know what they don’t want, but they still do not know what they want.”

“What do you want?” It is with this single question in mind that I walked the streets of Tehran and Qom in the days immediately following the disturbances. I was careful not to ask professional politicians this question. I chose instead to hold sometimes-lengthy conversations with religious leaders, students, intellectuals interested in the problems of Islam, and also with former guerrilla fighters who had abandoned the armed struggle in 1976 and had decided to work in a totally different fashion, inside the traditional society.⁵²

“What do you want?” During my entire stay in Iran, I did not hear even once the word “revolution,” but four out of five times, someone would answer, “An Islamic government.” This was not a surprise. Ayatollah Khomeini had already given this as his pithy response to journalists and the response remained at that point.

What precisely does this mean in a country like Iran, which has a large Muslim majority but is neither Arab nor Sunni and which is therefore less susceptible than some to Pan-Islamism or Pan-Arabism?

Indeed, Shi’ite Islam exhibits a number of characteristics that are likely to give the desire for an “Islamic government” a particular coloration. Concerning its organisation, there is an absence of hierarchy in the clergy, a certain independence of the religious leaders from one another, but a dependence (even a financial one) on those who listen to them, and an importance given to purely spiritual authority. The role, both echoing and guiding, that the clergy must play in order to sustain its influence — this is what the organization is all about. As for Shi’ite doctrine, there is the principle that truth was not completed and sealed by the last prophet. After Muhammad, another cycle of revelation begins, the unfinished cycle of the imams, who, through their words, their example, as well as their martyrdom, carry a light, always the same and always changing. It is this light that is capable of illuminating the law from the inside. The latter is made not only to be conserved, but also to release over time the spiritual meaning that it holds. Although invisible before his promised return, the Twelfth Imam is neither radically nor fatally absent. It is the people themselves who make him come back, insofar as the truth to which they awaken further enlightens them.

⁵⁰ Here Foucault probably intended to write “thousands.”

⁵¹ Two parties were set up by the government in this period, the Mardom Party (People’s Party) and the Iran-i Novin Party (New Iran Party).

⁵² The shah’s clampdown on the guerrilla activities of the Marxist-Leninist Fedayeen Khalq and the Islamic leftist Mujahedeen Khalq resulted in the death of more than three hundred of their members. Some then abandoned such politics, but others remained, allowing these groups to emerge in 1978–79, primarily within the student Left.

It is often said that for Shi'ism, all power is bad if it is not the power of the Imam. As we can see, things are much more complex. This is what Ayatollah Shariatmadari told me in the first few minutes of our meeting: "We are waiting for the return of the Imam, which does not mean that we are giving up on the possibility of a good government. This is also what you Christians are endeavouring to achieve, although you are waiting for Judgment Day." As if to lend a greater authenticity to his words, the ayatollah was surrounded by several members of the Committee on Human Rights in Iran⁵³ when he received me.

One thing must be clear. By "Islamic government," nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clerics would have a role of supervision or control. To me, the phrase "Islamic government" seemed to point to two orders of things.

"A utopia," some told me without any pejorative implication. "An ideal," most of them said to me. At any rate, it is something very old and also very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet, but also of advancing toward a luminous and distant point where it would be possible to renew fidelity rather than maintain obedience. In pursuit of this ideal, the distrust of legalism seemed to me to be essential, along with a faith in the creativity of Islam.

A religious authority explained to me that it would require long work by civil and religious experts, scholars, and believers in order to shed light on all the problems to which the Quran never claimed to give a precise response. But one can find some general directions here: Islam values work; no one can be deprived of the fruits of his labor; what must belong to all (water, the subsoil) shall not be appropriated by anyone.⁵⁴ With respect to liberties, they will be respected to the extent that their exercise will not harm others; minorities will be protected and free to live as they please on the condition that they do not injure the majority; between men and women there will not be inequality with respect to rights, but difference, since there is a natural difference. With respect to politics, decisions should be made by the majority, the leaders should be responsible to the people, and each person, as it is laid out in the Quran, should be able to stand up and hold accountable he who governs.

It is often said that the definitions of an Islamic government are imprecise. On the contrary, they seemed to me to have a familiar but, I must say, not too reassuring clarity. "These are basic formulas for democracy, whether bourgeois or revolutionary," I said. "Since the eighteenth century now, we have not ceased to repeat them, and you know where they have led." But I immediately received the following reply: "The Quran had enunciated them way before your philosophers, and if the Christian and industrialised West lost their meaning, Islam will know how to preserve their value and their efficacy."

When Iranians speak of Islamic government; when, under the threat of bullets, they transform it into a slogan of the streets; when they reject in its name, perhaps at the risk of a bloodbath, deals arranged by parties and politicians, they have other things on their minds than these formulas from everywhere and nowhere. They also have other things in their hearts. I believe that they are thinking about a reality that is very near to them, since they themselves are its active agents.

It is first and foremost about a movement that aims to give a permanent role in political life to the traditional structures of Islamic society. An Islamic government is what will allow the continuing activity of the thousands of political centres that have been spawned in mosques and religious communities in order to resist the shah's regime. I was given an example. Ten years ago, an earthquake hit Ferdows. The entire city had to be reconstructed, but since the plan that had been selected was not to the satisfaction of most of the peasants and the small artisans, they seceded. Under the guidance of a religious leader, they went on to found their city a little further away. They had collected funds in the entire region. They had collectively chosen places to settle, arranged a water supply, and organised cooperatives. They had called their city Islamiyeh. The earthquake had been an opportunity to use religious structures not only as centres of resistance, but also as sources for political creation. This is what one dreams about [*songe*] when one speaks of Islamic government.

⁵³ A group headed by Mehdi Bazargan, a prominent Islamist, who served as interpreter during this conversation between Foucault and Shariatmadari. In 1977, Bazargan and several others helped established the Iranian Committee for the Defense of Freedom and Human Rights, which became a key link between the secular human rights activists and the clerics. In 1979, he became Khomeini's first prime minister. Opposed to the taking of hostages at the American Embassy, he resigned in late 1979.

⁵⁴ This is apparently a reference to oil deposits.

The Invisible Present

But one dreams [*songe*] also of another movement, which is the inverse and the converse of the first. This is one that would allow the introduction of a spiritual dimension into political life, in order that it would not be, as always, the obstacle to spirituality, but rather its receptacle, its opportunity, and its ferment. This is where we encounter a shadow that haunts all political and religious life in Iran today: that of Ali Shariati, whose death two years ago gave him the position, so privileged in Shi'ism, of the invisible Present, of the ever-present Absent.

During his studies in Europe, Shariati, who came from a religious milieu, had been in contact with leaders of the Algerian Revolution, with various left-wing Christian movements, with an entire current of non-Marxist socialism. (He had attended Gurvitch's classes.)⁵⁵ He knew the work of Fanon and Massignon.⁵⁶ He came back to Mashhad, where he taught that the true meaning of Shi'ism should not be sought in a religion that had been institutionalised since the seventeenth century, but in the sermons of social justice and equality that had already been preached by the first imam. His "luck" was that persecution forced him to go to Tehran and to have to teach outside of the university, in a room prepared for him under the protection of a mosque. There, he addressed a public that was his, and that could soon be counted in the thousands: students, mullahs, intellectuals, modest people from the neighbourhood of the bazaar, and people passing through from the provinces. Shariati died like a martyr, hunted and with his books banned. He gave himself up when his father was arrested instead of him. After a year in prison, shortly after having gone into exile, he died in a manner that very few accept as having stemmed from natural causes. The other day, at the big protest in Tehran, Shariati's name was the only one that was called out, besides that of Khomeini.

The Inventors of the State

I do not feel comfortable speaking of Islamic government as an "idea" or even as an "ideal." Rather, it impressed me as a form of "political will." It impressed me in its effort to politicise structures that are inseparably social and religious in response to current problems. It also impressed me in its attempt to open a spiritual dimension in politics.

In the short term, this political will raises two questions:

1. Is it sufficiently intense now, and is its determination clear enough to prevent an "Amini solution,"⁵⁷ which has in its favour (or against it, if one prefers) the fact that it is acceptable to the shah, that it is recommended by the foreign powers, that it aims at a Western-style parliamentary regime, and that it would undoubtedly privilege the Islamic religion?

2. Is this political will rooted deeply enough to become a permanent factor in the political life of Iran, or will it dissipate like a cloud when the sky of political reality will have finally cleared, and when we will be able to talk about programs, parties, a constitution, plans, and so forth?

Politicians might say that the answers to these two questions determine much of their tactics today.

With respect to this "political will," however, there are also two questions that concern me even more deeply.

One bears on Iran and its peculiar destiny. At the dawn of history, Persia invented the state and conferred its models on Islam. Its administrators staffed the caliphate. But from this same Islam, it derived a religion that gave to its people infinite resources to resist state power. In this will for an "Islamic government," should one see a reconciliation, a contradiction, or the threshold of something new?

The other question concerns this little corner of the earth whose land, both above and below the surface, has strategic importance at a global level. For the people who inhabit this land, what is the point of searching, even at the cost of their own lives, for this thing whose possibility we have forgotten since the

⁵⁵ Georges Gurvitch (1894–1965) was a prominent French sociologist and founder of the journal *Autogestion* (Self-management)

⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon (1925–61), Caribbean-born philosopher, journalist, and psychologist, is often considered the greatest thinker produced by the African liberation struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Shariati translated some of his work into Persian. Louis Massignon (1883–1962), a leading French Orientalist, is known especially for his writings on the Sufis and other Islamic mystics.

⁵⁷ This would mean making the moderate pro-U.S. politician Ali Amini prime minister.

Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity, a *political spirituality*. I can already hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ According to the editors of *Dits et écrits*, at this point in the Italian version of this article Foucault inserted the phrase, "I who know very little about Iran."

Foucault's Response to Atoussa H.

First published as a letter in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 13, 1978. This is in response to the letter 'An Iranian Woman Writes' by "Atoussa H." That text was first published as a letter in the November 6, 1978 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and published in English in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*.

Mme. Atoussa H. did not read the article she criticises. This is her right. But she should not have credited me with the idea that "Muslim spirituality would advantageously replace dictatorship." Since people protested and were killed in Iran while shouting "Islamic government," one had an elementary obligation to ask oneself what content was given to the expression and what forces drove it. In addition, I pointed out several elements that did not seem to me to be very reassuring. If there had been in Mme. H.'s letter only a misreading, I would not have responded to it. But it contains two intolerable things: (1) It merges together all the aspects, all the forms, and all the potentialities of Islam within a single expression of contempt, for the sake of rejecting them in their entirety under the thousand-year-old reproach of "fanaticism." (2) It suspects all Westerners of being interested in Islam only due to scorn for Muslims. What could we say about a Westerner who would scorn Islam? The problem of Islam as a political force is an essential one for our time and the coming years. In order to approach it with a minimum of intelligence, the first condition is not to begin by bringing in hatred.

A Revolt with Bare Hands

First published in *Corriere della sera*, November 5, 1978.

Tehran—The kings of the last century were after all quite accommodating. One could see them in the early morning fleeing their palaces in big black sedans after having abdicated to a worried and courteous minister. Were the people in power more timorous than today, less attached to power, more sensitive to hate, or perhaps simply not as well armed? The fact remains that governments fell easily when the people went into the streets.

In the twentieth century, in order to overthrow a regime, more than “emotions” are needed. Arms, a military command, organisation, preparation, and so forth are necessary. What is happening in Iran is enough to worry today’s observers. In it they recognise not China, not Cuba, and not Vietnam,⁵⁹ but rather a tidal wave without a military leadership, without a vanguard, without a party. Nor can they find in it the movements of 1968.⁶⁰ This is because the men and women who protest with banners and flowers in Iran have an immediate political goal: They blame the shah and his regime, and in recent days they are indeed in the process of overthrowing them.

When I left Tehran a month ago, the movement was thought to be irreversible, but it was still possible to think that it would grow more slowly. Sudden obstacles could have emerged. There could have been a bloodbath if the movement became more intense; efforts to break it up if it spread; or a slowing down, if it showed that it was incapable of developing a program. None of this has happened, and things have developed very quickly.

Look at the first paradox and the first cause of its intensification. For ten years, the population has opposed a regime that is one of the best armed in the world, with a police force that is among the most powerful on earth. They have done so with bare hands, without resorting to armed struggle, with a determination and a courage that are in the process of immobilising the army, which, little by little, freezes and hesitates to fire on them. Two months ago, the army killed three to four thousand in Djaleh Square. Yesterday, two hundred thousand people marched in front of soldiers, who did not react. The government is reduced to sending in provocateurs, to no avail. As the final crisis looms, recourse to violent repression seems less and less possible. The uprising of a whole society has choked off the possibility of civil war.

The second paradox is that the revolt spread without splits or internal conflicts. The reopening of the universities could have put into the forefront the students, who are more westernised and more Marxist than the mullahs from the countryside. The liberation of over a thousand political prisoners could have created a conflict between old and new oppositionists. Finally and most important, the strike by the oil workers could have, on the one hand, worried the bourgeoisie of the bazaar and, on the other hand, started a cycle of strictly job-oriented demands. The modern industrialised sector could have separated itself from the “traditional” sector (by immediately accepting pay raises — the government was counting on this). But none of this happened. What’s more, the striking workers gave a tremendous economic weapon to the movement. The shutdown of the refineries dried up the government’s sources of revenue and gave an international dimension to the Iranian crisis. For Iran’s trading partners, the shah became an obstacle to their oil supply. This is a fitting response to those who had in an earlier period overthrown Mossadeq and reestablished the monarchy, the better to control the oil.

The third paradox is that the absence of long-term objectives is not an indication of weakness. On the contrary, because there is no plan for a government and because the slogans are simple, there can be a clear, obstinate, almost unanimous popular will.

Iran is currently experiencing a generalised political strike, which is really a strike in relation to politics. This has two aspects. There is a refusal to sustain in any manner the current system, to allow its apparatus, its administration, or its economy to function. But there is also a refusal to step aside in favour of a political battle over a future constitution, over social issues, over foreign policy, or over the replacement of officials. To be sure, these issues are discussed, but in such a way that these questions cannot give rise to

⁵⁹ Foucault refers to three upheavals, each with a Marxist dimension, with the first and the third ones also having been led by Marxist-Leninist vanguard parties: the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and the Vietnamese national resistance, first against the French and then the United States, ending in 1975.

⁶⁰ The massive, mainly student, revolts of 1968 took their most radical form in France.

political manipulation by anyone. All of these spines, the Iranian people, transform themselves into a hedgehog.⁶¹ The Iranian people's political will is to prevent politics from gaining a foothold.

It is a law of history that the simpler the people's will, the more complex the job of the politicians. This is undoubtedly because politics is not what it pretends to be, the expression of a collective will. Politics breathes well only where this will is multiple, hesitant, confused, and obscure even to itself.

For the moment, two solutions have been offered to give a political form to a whole people's desire for a change of regime. There is the proposal of Ali Amini, the shah's former prime minister, a man of compromise. Amini's proposal assumes that it is only a matter of rejecting, almost fondly, the shah and his method of governance. If the sovereign disappears, if the regime is liberalised, the political manoeuvring would be able to start again. Karim Sanjabi, the leader of the National Front and a former member of the Mossadeq government, shows greater foresight by proposing that the rejection of the dynasty take the form of a referendum. This would be a way of pushing the shah aside even before the vote took place, since the very process of organising it would call into question the power he inherited thirty-five years ago. Even before the official demise of the monarchy, a referendum campaign would create the opportunity for a full renewal of political life, including the political parties. The day after such a referendum, whose outcome would be certain, Iran would find itself without a ruler, and perhaps without a constitution, but with a political scene already solidly in place. Everything suggests that the National Front will give a green light to Amini's proposal only on condition that latter commit himself to organising a referendum on the fate of the dynasty.

Here there is a problem, however. Ayatollah Khomeini and the clerics who follow him want to force the shah's departure solely through the strength of the people's movement that they have organised, unconnected to the political parties. The clerics have forged, or in any case sustained, a collective will that has been strong enough to hold at bay even the most police-ridden monarchy in the world. They are certainly not very anxious to have a referendum that would transform this collective will into a political coalition. But it is certainly very difficult to reject all forms of electoral consultation in the name of the people's will. This is why Khomeini has just this very morning proposed a different type of referendum. It would be held after the shah is forced out solely by the pressure of the ongoing movement, and it would centre on the establishment of an "Islamic government." The political parties would then find themselves in a very embarrassing position. These parties would either have to reject one of the essential themes of the people's movement. (The politicians would then be opposed to the religious leaders and would certainly not win.) Or they would have to bind their own hands in advance by accepting a form of government under which the political parties would have precious little room for manoeuvre. At the same time, the ayatollah brandished two threats: that of civil war if the shah would not leave and that of expelling from the movement any person or party that would accept even temporarily the preservation of the dynasty, even if deprived of power. It is a way of reviving openly the slogan of a "strike against politics."⁶²

The question today is no longer whether or not Muhammad Reza will leave. Except in the unlikely case of a complete turnabout in the political situation, he will leave. Instead, it is a question of knowing what form this naked and massive will would take, this will that for a long time has said no to its ruler and which has finally disarmed him. It is a question of knowing when and how the will of all will give way to politics. It is a question of knowing if this will wants to do so and if it must do so. It is the practical problem of all revolutions and the theoretical problem of all political philosophies. Let us admit that we Westerners would be in a poor position to give advice to the Iranians on this matter.

⁶¹ This small animal has sharp spines on its back, which bristle when it is attacked.

⁶² This meant no political debates or negotiations with the regime, an absolutely uncompromising stance that was very popular with both the Islamists and the far left groups like the Fedayeen and the Mujahedeen.

The Challenge to the Opposition

First published in *Corriere della sera*, November 7, 1978.⁶³

Tehran—Two events set the stage for what happened this weekend in Tehran:

1. The entire opposition has just regrouped behind Ayatollah Khomeini. A way out supported by the Americans called for the shah's semiretirement and a progressive liberalisation, but this presupposed that the main opposition parties would remain neutral. During the day on Friday, Karim Sanjabi, the leader of the National Front, had finally accepted the first point of the ayatollah's declaration, to the effect that the shah's monarchy is illegitimate and illegal. His abdication and departure had thus become a prerequisite for the reconstitution of political life. By Friday evening, the monarch lacked even indirect support anywhere among the opposition, leaving him without any room to manoeuvre. For its part, the opposition was totally ready and organised.

2. The day before, the official Soviet press had termed the demand for an Islamic government in Iran "dangerous." It was, on the one hand, a way of signalling to the Americans that the USSR did not object to a solution, even a "vigorous one," that would block the way for an opposition movement under Khomeini. It was also, on the other hand, a way of signalling to the shah that in case of a long and violent struggle, the opposition would find no support in the USSR, or in the arms-supplying people's democracies,⁶⁴ or in those Middle Eastern governments sponsored by the Russians. Therefore, on the international side, it was the shah who on Friday evening was completely ready and armed, while the opposition was completely isolated.

The shah had only one card left to play. It consisted of getting these international facts to play on the domestic stage.

The opportunity was given by a student riot. Whether it was provoked and by whom will be a topic of discussion for a long time to come. Was it provoked by gunfire from soldiers on Saturday, or by their retreat on Sunday? The word "provocation" always bothers me, because there is no action that is unprovoked.⁶⁵ The problem is to know what makes someone susceptible to provocation. Why did the students switch this weekend to a type of action different from that of previous months, one that was probably not desired by even the most radical leaders of the opposition? Maybe it was because of the rivalry between the political and the religious groups. There was on everybody's mind a sort of mutual challenge between revolutionary radicalism and Islamic radicalism, neither of which wanted to seem more conciliatory and less courageous than the other. For this reason and because of a situation that had greatly evolved, the student milieu revealed itself as much more "explosive" than the rest of the population, alongside whom these same students had demonstrated a few weeks ago.

Now the army has occupied Tehran, and top military officers are running the country. Is this the seizure of power by the military that some had predicted? For the moment, it seems not.

Indeed, the generals, now government ministers, did not impose themselves on the shah. They are the king's men, designated by him long ago to occupy the highest positions. On the other hand, the shah declared this very morning that the new government was in place only for a short time, and that if order were reestablished, liberalisation would recommence immediately. I do not think that a lot of Iranians believe him, but it is a way of telling the opposition, "You declared that I was illegal, and you wanted to liberalise *after me*. You will not be able to do it *without me*, not only because I have the power to stay, but also because I have political legitimacy." It is also a way of telling the Americans and their man, Ali Amini: "You wanted me to disappear for the benefit of my big clown of a son, but as you can see, I am more indispensable than ever to the liberalisation of the regime."

In short, the army intervened today neither to carry out a large-scale repression of the opposition, nor to eliminate for its own benefit both the king and his adversaries. The shah caused the army to move in order to divide the opposition and to guarantee himself a strong hand at a time when he would have to

⁶³ According to the editors of *Dits et écrits*, Foucault had proposed two possible titles for this article, "Order Has Its Dangers" and "The Weekend of Tehran." The latter referred to the weekend of November 4–5, when students attacked and burned symbols of the Pahlavi dynasty and the West.

⁶⁴ Some of the Eastern European communist regimes, particularly in Czechoslovakia, had a history of supplying arms to various Third World liberation movements.

⁶⁵ Here Foucault seems to be criticising a frequent characterisation of far leftist actions by the French Communist Party and its counterparts elsewhere, for example, in 1968.

negotiate with the moderate opposition. One can imagine — but it is on my part pure speculation — that the shah pulled off this trick with the help of the Americans, who train on site a large part of his army. However, he may have done so in order to resist Carter and those who saw the need for him to go.⁶⁶

In order for the shah's calculations to prove correct, however, the country would have to remain as quiet as Tehran is this morning. The army, or at least the most reliable part of the army, is strong enough to hold the big cities. But can it maintain a hold over the country — I mean not only the whole territory but also the whole population? Can it control the workers, the civil servants, and the bazaar merchants, who for months and months have been on strike and have paralysed the various sectors of society? For it is here that the shah finds himself up against the religious leaders, the mullahs, and the irreducible ayatollah. They could continue to organise the resistance, which could take many forms other than riots, or could move to a completely different level of effectiveness. The shah has responded to the mass political strike of last week, which aimed to topple him, by staging a noisy return. He reappeared as a man of law and order. He can impose order on the street, but definitely not on society. Were he to attempt the latter, the army might crumble in his hands. One fine morning, an officer could consider the idea of making a pact with this religious movement, which is certainly not ready to give in to the shah, even if he takes refuge behind his tanks. The religious movement, which has finally absorbed the entire political opposition, could well break up the apparent unity of the army by forming an alliance with one of its factions. Order has its dangers.

⁶⁶ The reference to U.S. president Jimmy Carter's having distanced himself from the shah.

The Revolt in Iran Spreads on Cassette Tapes

First published in *Corriere della sera*, November 19, 1978.⁶⁷

Tehran—In Iran the religious calendar sets the political schedule. On December 2, the Muharram celebrations will begin.⁶⁸ The death of Imam Hussein will be celebrated. It is the great ritual of penitence. (Not long ago, one could still see marchers flagellating themselves.) But the feeling of sinfulness that could remind us of Christianity is indissolubly linked to the exaltation of martyrdom for a just cause. It is a time when the crowds are ready to advance toward death in the intoxication of sacrifice. During these days, the Shi'ite people become enamoured with extremes.

It is said that order is slowly being reestablished in Iran. In fact, the whole country is holding its breath. An American advisor sounds hopeful: "If we hang on during Muharram, everything can be saved. Otherwise . . ." The State Department is also awaiting the anniversary of the martyred imam.

Between the demonstrations in September during Ramadan and the impending great mourning, what is to be done? At first, there was the mild response under Sharif-Imami.⁶⁹ Prisoners were freed, political parties legalised, and censorship abolished. There was an attempt to decrease political tensions in order to prevent them from feeding the religious fervour. Then on November 5 came a harsh response, with the military coming to power. It is now up to the army to occupy the country with enough force to limit the effects of Muharram, but also in a fashion measured enough to avoid an explosion of despair.

It is said that this change of direction was suggested to or imposed on the shah by a small lobby: General Oveisi, manufacturers like Khayami (automobiles) and Reza'i (copper), politicians like Fouroud (former mayor of Tehran) or Massoudi (from the 1953 coup).⁷⁰ Perhaps. But if a sudden decision had been made to change the leadership team in order to prepare for Muharram "the hard way," it is due to the situation in the country as a whole. Specifically, it is because of the strikes that have spread from one province to another like a prairie fire. There are strikes in the oil sector, the steel mills, the Minoo factories,⁷¹ public transport, Iran Air, and public administration. Most surprisingly, there were work stoppages in customs houses and tax bureaus, where work is not easily stopped, given the fact that its remuneration is increased tenfold or a hundredfold by smuggling and bribery. In a regime like that of the shah, if corruption itself goes on strike . . .⁷²

I wanted to know what this strike movement, its magnitude hidden by censorship, is made of. In Tehran, I met some of the more "privileged" strikers, a crew from Iran Air. They had an elegant apartment, teak furniture, and American magazines. A thousand kilometres to the south, I met the "hard ones," those from the oil sector. What European has not dreamed about Abadan, the biggest refinery in the world, producing six million barrels a day? It is a surprise to find it to be so huge, yet rather old-fashioned, surrounded by corrugated iron, with British-style management buildings, half-industrial and half-colonial, that one can glimpse above the flares and the chimneys. It is a colonial governor's palace, modified by the austerity of a big Manchester spinning mill. But one can see that it is a powerful institution, respectable and rich, by the tremendous misery it has created on this island of sand between two yellowish rivers. The misery starts around the factory with a sort of subtropical mining village, then very quickly one enters the slums

⁶⁷ This article was written during Foucault's second trip to Iran, from November 9 to November 16.

⁶⁸ In the yearly Muharram festival, Shi'ites mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, a son of Imam Ali. Hussein was killed in Karbala in 680 CE in a battle against forces sent by Yazid, son of Muawiyeh, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty.

⁶⁹ Foucault wrote mistakenly, "Hamani." Ja'far Sharif-Imami, leader of the Senate, was a loyal royalist. In August 1978, an arson fire at the Rex Cinema in Abadan killed hundreds in an incident that was at the time wrongly attributed to the regime. (Later reports attributed the fire to the Islamists.) During the crisis that followed the fire, the shah appointed Sharif-Imami prime minister. His government lasted until November 1978, when General Gholamreza Azhari became prime minister.

⁷⁰ General Gholam Ali Oveisi, born in Qom, and highly religious, was also fiercely loyal to the shah. After martial law was declared in November, he became the military commander in Tehran. In 1962, Mayor Fathollah Fouroud helped to orchestrate an attack by the army on Tehran University students, who were demanding free elections. Ahmad and Mahmoud Khayami ran the Paykan automobile company, the nation's largest. The Reza'i brothers owned copper mines in Kirman Province. Senator Abbas Massoudi established the daily newspaper *Ettela'at* in 1926 and used to have lunch with the shah on Wednesdays.

⁷¹ This large chain of factories produced foodstuffs.

⁷² Ellipsis points in original.

where children swarm between truck chassis and heaps of scrap iron, and finally one arrives at the hovels of dried mud bathed in filth. There, crouching children neither cry nor move. Then everything disappears in the grove of palms that leads to the desert, which is the front and the rear of one of the most valuable properties in the world.

There are amazing similarities between the Iran Air strikers, who meet you in their living rooms, and those of Abadan, whom one must meet in secret after mysterious arrangements have been made. There is this one, if no other. They were on strike for the first time, the former because they had not had the desire, the latter because they had not had the right. Furthermore, all these strikes graft political issues directly onto economic demands. The workers from the refinery received a 25 percent raise last March. After October 23, the beginning of the strike, they obtained, without too many discussions on labor issues, first a 10 percent wage increase, then a 10 percent “factory bonus.” (“Wording had to be found to justify this raise,” said a management representative.) Then they were given a hundred rials every day for lunch.⁷³ It seems as though the Abadan strikers could continue indefinitely. At any rate, like the pilots of Iran Air who cannot complain about their salaries, what they want is the abolition of martial law, the liberation of all political prisoners, the dissolution — some say — of the SAVAK, and the punishment of thieves and torturers.

Neither the Iran Air workers nor the oil workers — and this seemed to me a little strange at the time — asked for the departure of the shah or the “end of the regime.” Each, however, claims to want it. Caution? Perhaps. The fact is that, first and foremost, they believe that it is up to the entire people to formulate this demand and, when the time comes, to impose it. It suffices for the moment that the old saint in exile in Paris asks for this on their behalf, without faltering. Today, they are all conscious of participating in a political strike, because they are doing so in solidarity with the entire nation. An Iran Air pilot explained to me that during the flight he is responsible for the *safety* of the passengers. If he does not fly today, it is because he has to watch over the *safety* of the country. In Abadan, the workers say that production has never been totally stopped and that it has been partially started again because domestic needs must be met. The thirty-eight tankers lying offshore in the bay will still have to wait. Are these simple declarations of principle? Probably. Nevertheless, these declarations indicate the mood of these scattered strike movements. They do not constitute a *general* strike, but each one sees itself in *national* terms.

This is why these strikes can so easily support each other. The teachers of Abadan and the oil workers declared complete solidarity with one another. On November 4, the workers of Iran Nippon, of the Iran-Japan Petroleum Company, and of the petrochemical complex united with those from the refinery in a joint meeting. This is also why there has been a continual call for foreigners to leave, whether American technicians, French air hostesses, or Afghan labourers: “We want our country to be nationalised.” How to transform these strikes with national ramifications into a general strike? This is the current problem. No single party has the necessary strength to achieve this. (The nationwide strike endorsed by some politicians for November 12 did not fail, as was said, but simply never took place.) On the one hand, the extraordinary strength of the movement leans locally on a few clandestine and diffuse organisations. (They stem from old Islamic or Marxist guerrilla movements, like that of Ettehadieh Communist that I heard about in Abadan.)⁷⁴ On the other hand, however, the point of connection is found outside of the country, outside of the political organisations, outside of all possible negotiations. This is in Khomeini, in his inflexible refusal to compromise and in the love that everyone individually feels for him. It was impressive to hear a Boeing pilot say in the name of his workmates: “You have in France the most precious thing that Iran has possessed for the last century. It is up to you to protect it.” The tone was commanding. It was even more impressive to hear the strikers of Abadan say: “We are not particularly religious.” “Whom do you trust then? A political party?” I asked. “No, no one.” “A man?” I asked. “No, no one, except Khomeini, and he alone.”

The first task undertaken by the military government was to bring the strikes to a halt, a classic expedient and thus uncertain. The SAVAK, the political police that had been the shame of the regime, has instead become its most embarrassing failure. Its agents, who returned to their previous vocation of brawlers, are sent everywhere to provoke, burn, and use their truncheons. Everything is then attributed to the strikers and the demonstrators, running the risk that such a provocation would only add fuel to the fire and create an authentic explosion, as in Tehran. Even the army has moved into the Abadan refinery, leaving behind wounded people in its wake. It remains behind the factories with its armoured vehicles. The soldiers

⁷³ At the time, 100 rials equaled about \$1.50 U.S., a significant sum for an Iranian worker.

⁷⁴ Ettehadieh Communist (Communist Platform) Iran is a far left group with Maoist origins.

have entered the workers' homes in order to lead them by force to the refinery. But how can they force them to work?

During the two months of the Sharif-Imami government, the news transmitted every day by the once again free press had "kindled" the strikes, one after the other. The military had to reestablish censorship, to which the journalists responded by refusing to publish the newspapers. They knew very well that they were making way for an entire network of information, a network that fifteen years of obscurantism had allowed people to perfect — that of telephones, of cassette tapes, of mosques and sermons, and of law offices and intellectual circles.

I was able to observe the functioning of one of these "grassroots cells" of information. It was near one of the Abadan mosques, with the usual backdrop of great poverty, except for a few carpets. The mullah, his back against a bookshelf filled with religious books and surrounded by a dozen of the faithful, was seated next to an old telephone that was constantly ringing — work stopped in Ahwaz, several deaths in Lahijan, and so forth. At that very moment, when the public relations director of the National Iranian Oil Company was manufacturing for journalists the "international truth" of the strike (economic demands that had been satisfied, absolutely no political demands, general and continued resumption of work), I heard the mullah, in his corner, manufacturing the "Iranian truth" of the same event: there were no economic demands at all and all of them were political.

It is said that De Gaulle was able to resist the Algiers putsch, thanks to the transistor.⁷⁵ If the shah is about to fall, it will be due largely to the cassette tape. It is the tool *par excellence* of counterinformation. Last Sunday, I went to the Tehran cemetery, the only place where meetings are tolerated under martial law. People stood behind banners and laurel wreaths, cursing the shah. Then they sat down. One by one, three men, including a religious leader, stood up and started talking with great intensity, almost with violence. But when they were about to leave, at least two hundred soldiers blocked the gates with machine guns, armoured vehicles, and two tanks. The speakers were arrested, as well as all those who had tape recorders.

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

⁷⁵ In 1961, when right-wing French generals staged a revolt at a time when De Gaulle was ready to negotiate independence for Algeria, he quashed the coup by appealing directly to rank-and-file soldiers over the radio.

The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt

First published in *Corriere della sera*, November 26, 1978.⁷⁶

Tehran — Iran's year-long period of unrest is coming to a head. On the watch-face of politics, the hand has hardly moved. The semi-liberal September government was replaced in November by a half-military one. In fact, the whole country is engulfed by revolt: the cities, the countryside, the religious centres, the oil regions, the bazaars, the universities, the civil servants, and the intellectuals. The privileged rats are jumping ship. An entire century in Iran — one of economic development, foreign domination, modernisation, and the dynasty, as well as its daily life and its moral system — is being put into question. It is being totally rejected.

I cannot write the history of the future, and I am also rather clumsy at foreseeing the past. However, I would like to try to grasp *what is happening right now*, because these days nothing is finished, and the dice are still being rolled. It is perhaps this that is the work of a journalist, but it is true that I am nothing but a neophyte.

Iran was never colonised. In the nineteenth century, the British and the Russians divided it into zones of influence, according to a precolonial model. Then came oil, two World Wars, the Middle East conflict, and the great confrontations in Asia. At one stroke, Iran moved to a neocolonial position within the orbit of the United States. In a long period of dependency without direct colonisation, the country's social structures were not radically destroyed. These social structures were not completely overturned, even by the surge of oil revenue, which certainly enriched the privileged, favoured speculation, and permitted an over-provisioning of the army. The changes did not create new social forces, however. The bourgeoisie of the bazaars was weakened, and the village communities were shaken by the agrarian reform. However, both of them survived enough to suffer from dependency and the changes that it brought, but also enough to resist the regime that was responsible for these changes as well.

This same situation had the opposite effect on the political movements. In the half-light of dependency, they too subsisted, but could not sustain themselves as real forces. This was due not only to repression, but also to their own choices. The Communist Party was tied to the USSR, was compromised by the occupation of Azerbaijan under Stalin, and was ambiguous in its support of the "bourgeois nationalism" of Mossadeq.⁷⁷ With respect to the National Front, heir of this same Mossadeq, it has been waiting for fifteen years, without making a move, for the moment of a liberalisation that it did not believe to be possible without the permission of the Americans.⁷⁸ During this time, some impatient cadres from the Communist Party were becoming technocrats for the regime. They were dreaming of an authoritarian government that would develop a nationalist politics. In short, the political parties had been victims of the "dependent dictatorship" that was the shah's regime. In the name of realism, some played the card of independence, others that of freedom.

Because of, on the one hand, the absence of a coloniser-occupier and, on the other, the presence of a national army and a sizeable police force, the political-military organisations, which elsewhere organised the struggle for decolonisation and which, when the time came, found themselves in a position to negotiate independence and impose the departure of the colonial power, could not emerge. In Iran, the rejection of the regime is a massive social phenomenon. This does not mean that the rejection is confused, emotional, or barely self-conscious. On the contrary, it spreads in an oddly effective manner, from the strikes to the demonstrations, from the bazaars to the universities, from the leaflets to the sermons, through shopkeepers, workers, clerics, teachers, and students. For the moment, however, no party, no man, and no political ideology can boast that it represents this movement. Nor can anyone claim to be at its head. This movement has no counterpart and no expression in the political order.

The paradox, however, is that it constitutes a perfectly unified collective will. It is surprising to see this immense country, with a population distributed around two large desert plateaus, a country able to afford the latest technical innovations alongside forms of life unchanged for the last thousand years, a

⁷⁶ According to the editors of *Dits et écrits*, the title proposed by Foucault was "Iran's Madness."

⁷⁷ After World War II, when the Soviet army did not leave the northern province of Azerbaijan, the Tudeh (Communist) Party refused to condemn this action, thus losing considerable support. In 1953, it also undermined Mossadeq at a crucial point during his confrontation with the United States and Britain.

⁷⁸ After 1961, the National Front lost much of its support, and the Islamist-oriented Iran Liberation Movement, led by Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani, took its place as the most important internal opposition movement.

country that is languishing under censorship and the absence of public freedoms, and yet demonstrating an extraordinary unity in spite of all this. It is the same protest, it is the same will, that is expressed by a doctor from Tehran and a provincial mullah, by an oil worker, by a postal employee, and by a female student wearing the chador. This will includes something rather disconcerting. It is always based on the same thing, a sole and very precise thing, the departure of the shah. But for the Iranian people, this unique thing means *everything*. This political will yearns for 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, and new relations with the West, with the Arab countries, with Asia, and so forth. Somewhat like the European students in the 1960s, the Iranians want it all, but this “all” is not a “liberation of desires.” This political will is one of breaking away from all that marks their country and their daily lives with the presence of global hegemonies. Iranians also view the political parties — liberal or socialist, with either a pro-American tendency or a Marxist inspiration — or, it is better to say, the political scene itself, as still and always the agents of these hegemonies.

Hence, the role of this almost mythical figure, Khomeini. Today, no head of state, no political leader, even one supported by the whole media of his country, can boast of being the object of such a personal and intense attachment. These ties are probably the result of three things. Khomeini *is not there*. For the last fifteen years, he has been living in exile and does not want to return until the shah has left. Khomeini *says nothing*, nothing other than no — to the shah, to the regime, to dependency. Finally, Khomeini *is not a politician*. There will not be a Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government. Khomeini is the focal point of a collective will. What is this unwavering intransigence seeking? Is it the end of a form of dependency where, behind the Americans, an international consensus and a certain “state of the world” can be recognised? Is it the end of a dependency of which the dictatorship is the direct instrument, but for which the political manoeuvres could well be the indirect means? It is not only a spontaneous uprising that lacks political organisation, but also movement that wants to disengage itself from both external domination and internal politics.

After I left Iran, the question that I was constantly asked was, of course: “Is this revolution?” (This is the price at which, in France, an entire sector of public opinion becomes interested in that which is “not about us.”) I did not answer, but I wanted to say that it is not a revolution, not in the literal sense of the term, not a way of standing up and straightening things out. It is the insurrection of men with bare hands who want to lift the fearful weight, the weight of the entire world order that bears down on each of us, but more specifically on them, these oil workers and peasants at the frontiers of empires. It is perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane.

One can understand the difficulties facing the politicians. They outline solutions, which are easier to find than people say. They range from a pure and simple military regime to a constitutional transformation that would lead from a regency to a republic. All of them are based on the elimination of the shah. What is it that the people want? Do they really want nothing more? Everybody is quite aware that they want something completely different. This is why the politicians hesitate to offer them simply that, which is why the situation is at an impasse. Indeed, what place can be given, within the calculations of politics, to such a movement, to a movement that does not let itself be divided among political choices, a movement through which blows the breath of a religion that speaks less of the hereafter than of the transfiguration of this world?

A Powder Keg Called Islam

First published in *Corriere della sera*, February 13, 1979.

Tehran⁷⁹ — On February 11, 1979, the Iranian Revolution took place. I have the impression that I will read this sentence in tomorrow's newspapers and in the history books of the future. It is true that in the strange series of events that have marked the past twelve months of Iranian politics, a known figure finally appears. This long succession of festivities and mourning, these millions of men in the street invoking Allah, the mullahs in the cemeteries proclaiming revolt and prayer, these sermons distributed on cassette tapes, and this old man who, every day, crosses the road in a suburb of Paris in order to kneel down in the direction of Mecca; it was difficult for us to call all this a "revolution."

Today, we feel as though we are in a more familiar world. There were the barricades; weapons had been seized from the arsenals; and a council assembled hastily left the ministers just enough time to resign before stones began shattering the windows and before the doors burst open under the pressure of the crowd. History just placed on the bottom of the page the red seal that authenticates a revolution. Religion's role was to open the curtain; the mullahs will now disperse, taking off in a great flight of black and white robes. The decor is changing. The first act is going to begin: that of the struggle of the classes, of the armed vanguards, and of the party that organises the masses, and so forth.

Is this so certain?

One did not have to be a great prophet in order to notice that the shah, last summer, was already politically dead, nor in order to realise that the army could not constitute an independent political force. It was not necessary to be a seer in order to ascertain that religion did not constitute a form of compromise, but rather a real force, one that could raise a people not only against the monarch and his police, but against an entire regime, an entire way of life, an entire world. But things today seem rather clear, permitting a retracing of what needs to be called the strategy of the religious movement. The long demonstrations — sometimes bloody, but incessantly repeated — were as much juridical as political, depriving the shah of his legitimacy and the political personnel of their representativeness. The National Front bowed out. Bakhtiar,⁸⁰ on the contrary, wanted to resist and to receive from the shah a legitimacy that he would have deserved for having guaranteed the shah's irrevocable departure. In vain.

The second obstacle, the Americans, seemed formidable. They yielded, however, due to powerlessness and also by calculation. Rather than support at arm's length a dying regime, with which they were all too compromised, they prefer to allow the development of a Chilean-type situation, to allow the sharpening of the internal conflicts and then to intervene. And perhaps they think that this movement, which, deep down, worries all of the regimes of the region, will accelerate the realisation of an agreement in the Middle East. This was what the Palestinians and the Israelis at once felt, with the former appealing to the ayatollah for the liberation of all the holy places and the latter announcing one further reason not to give up anything.

With respect to the obstacle of the army, it was clear that it was paralysed by the political currents running through it. But this paralysis, which constituted an advantage for the opposition as long as the shah was still in power, became a danger, since each current felt free, in the absence of all state power, to have its own way. It was necessary to unite the army sector by sector, without breaking it up too soon.

But the clash occurred much faster than was expected. Whether from provocation or accident, it did not matter. A cell of "hard-liners" attacked the part of the army that had joined with the ayatollah, precipitating between that part of the army and the crowd a rapprochement that went well beyond merely marching side by side. Quickly thereafter came the distribution of arms, the pinnacle *par excellence* of all revolutionary uprisings.

It is solely this distribution of arms that made everything seesaw back and forth, avoiding a civil war. The military command realised that a major part of the troops was escaping its control and that in the arsenals there were enough weapons to arm tens of thousands of civilians. It was better to go over as a bloc before the population took up arms, perhaps for years. The religious leaders immediately returned the compliment: they gave the order to hand back the arms.

⁷⁹ Dateline apparently added by the newspaper's editors. Foucault had not been in Iran for two months.

⁸⁰ Shapour Bakhtiar was the last prime minister appointed by the shah. He had been a member of the moderate wing of the National Front, which now expelled him.

Today, we are still at this point, in a situation that has not come to a head. The “revolution” showed, at certain moments, some of its familiar traits, but things are still astonishingly ambiguous.

The army, which went over to the religious leaders without ever having been really broken up, is going to weigh heavily. Its different currents are going to confront each other in the shadows in order to determine who will be the “new guard” of the regime, the one that protects it, enables it to hold on, and takes hold of it.

At the other extreme, it is certain that all will not give up their arms. The “Marxist-Leninists,” who played no small role in the movement, probably think that it is necessary to move from the unity of the masses to the class struggle. Also, not having been the “vanguard” that rallies and rouses, they will want to be the force that settles the ambiguity and that clarifies the situation: “outflanking,” the better to divide.

This nonviolent uprising of a whole people that overthrew an all-powerful regime — an incredibly rare outcome for the twentieth century — faces a decisive choice. Maybe its historic significance will be found, not in its conformity to a recognised “revolutionary” model, but instead in its potential to overturn the existing political situation in the Middle East and thus the global strategic equilibrium. Its singularity, which has up to now constituted its force, consequently threatens to give it the power to expand. Thus, it is true that, as an “Islamic” movement, it can set the entire region afire, overturn the most unstable regimes, and disturb the most solid ones. Islam — which is not simply a religion, but an entire way of life, an adherence to a history and a civilisation — has a good chance to become a gigantic powder keg, at the level of hundreds of millions of men. Since yesterday, any Muslim state can be revolutionised from the inside, based on its time-honoured traditions.

Indeed, it is also important to recognise that the demand for the “legitimate rights of the Palestinian people” has hardly stirred the Arab peoples. What would happen if this cause experienced the dynamism of an Islamic movement, something much stronger than the effect of giving it a Marxist, Leninist, or Maoist character? Additionally, how strong would Khomeini’s “religious” movement become, if it were to put forward the liberation of Palestine as its objective? The Jordan no longer flows very far from Iran.

Foucault's Response to Claudie and Jacques Broyelle

First published in *Le Matin*, March 26, 1979, under the title 'Michel Foucault and Iran.' This is in response to the letter 'What Are the Philosophers Dreaming About? Was Michel Foucault Mistaken about the Iranian Revolution?' by Claudie and Jacques Broyelle. That text was first published as a letter in the March 24, 1979 issue of *Le Matin*, and published in English in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*.

Two weeks ago, *Le Matin* asked me to respond to M. Debray-Ritzen;⁸¹ today, to M. and Mme. Broyelle. To him, I was anti-psychiatry. To them, I am "anti-judiciary." I will respond neither to the one nor the others, because throughout "my life" I have never taken part in polemics. I have no intention of beginning now. There is another reason, also based on principles. I am "summoned to acknowledge my errors." This expression and the practice it designates remind me of something and of many things, against which I have fought. I will not lend myself, even "through the press," to a manoeuvre whose form and content I detest.

"You are going to confess, or you will shout long live the assassins." Some utter this sentence by profession, others by taste or habit. I think that it is necessary to leave this order on the lips of those who utter it and to discuss it only with those who are strangers to such forms of conduct. I am, therefore, very anxious to be able to debate here and now the question of Iran, as soon as *Le Matin* will give me the opportunity. Blanchot⁸² teaches that criticism begins with attention, good demeanour, and generosity.

⁸¹ Pierre Debray-Ritzen was a conservative child psychiatrist, critical of Foucault ever since the publication of *Madness and Civilization* (1961).

⁸² Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) was a prominent writer and literary critic.

Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit

This conversation with Foucault originally appeared as the appendix to Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet, *Iran: la révolution au nom de Dieu* (227–41), first published in March 1979.

CLAIRE BRIÈRE: Could we begin with the simplest question? Like a lot of others, like you, I have been fascinated by what happened in Iran. Why?

MICHEL FOUCAULT: I would like to go back at once to another, perhaps less important question, but one that may provide a way in: What is it about what has happened in Iran that a whole lot of people, on the left and on the right, find somewhat irritating? The Iran affair and the way in which it has taken place have not aroused the same kind of untroubled sympathy as Portugal,⁸³ for example, or Nicaragua. I'm not saying that Nicaragua, in the middle of summer, at a time when people are tanning themselves in the sun, aroused a great deal of interest, but in the case of Iran, I soon felt a small, epidermic reaction that was not one of immediate sympathy. To take an example: There was this journalist you know very well. At Tehran she wrote an article that was published in Paris and, in the last sentence, in which she spoke of the Islamic revolt, she found that the adjective "fanatic," which she had certainly not written, had been crudely added. This strikes me as being fairly typical of the irritations that the Iranian movement has provoked.

PIERRE BLANCHET: There are several possible attitudes to Iran. There's the attitude of the classic, orthodox, extreme left. I'd cite above all the Communist League,⁸⁴ which supports Iran and the whole of the extreme left, various Marxist-Leninist groups, which say they are religious rebels, but that doesn't really matter. Religion is only a shield. Therefore we can support them unhesitatingly; it is a classic anti-imperialist struggle, like that in Vietnam, led by a religious man, Khomeini, but one who might be a Marxist-Leninist. To read *L'Humanité*, one might think that the PC [Communist Party] had the same attitude as the LCR [Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist League]. On the other hand, the attitude of the more moderate left, whether of the PS [Socialist Party] or that of the more marginal left around the newspaper *Libération*, is one of irritation from the outset. They would say more or less two things. First: Religion is the veil, an archaism, a regression at least as far as women are concerned; the second, which cannot be denied, because one feels it: If ever the clerics come to power and apply their program, should we not fear a new dictatorship?

MICHEL FOUCAULT: It might be said that, behind these two irritations, there is another, or perhaps an astonishment, a sort of unease when confronted by a phenomenon that is, for our political mentality, very curious. It is a phenomenon that may be called revolutionary in the very broad sense of the term, since it concerns the uprising of a whole nation against a power that oppresses it. Now, we recognise a revolution when we can observe two dynamics: one is that of the contradictions in that society, that of the class struggle or of social confrontations. Then there is a political dynamic, that is to say, the presence of a vanguard, class, party, or political ideology, in short, a spearhead that carries the whole nation with it. Now it seems to me that, in what is happening in Iran, one can recognise neither of those two dynamics that are for us distinctive signs and explicit marks of a revolutionary phenomenon. What, for us, is a revolutionary movement in which one cannot situate the internal contradictions of a society, and in which one cannot point out a vanguard either?

PIERRE BLANCHET: At Tehran University, there were — I have met several of them — Marxists who were all conscious of living through a fantastic revolution. It was even much more than they had imagined, hoped for, dreamt for, dreamt about. Invariably, when asked what they thought, the Marxists replied: "It's a revolutionary situation, but there's no vanguard."

CLAIRE BRIÈRE: The reaction I've heard most often about Iran is that people don't understand. When a movement is called revolutionary, people in the West, including ourselves, always have the notion of progress, of something that is about to be transformed in the direction of progress. All this is put into question by the religious phenomenon. Indeed, the wave of religious confrontation is based on notions that go back for thirteen centuries; it is with these that the shah has been challenged, while, at the same time, advancing claims for social justice, etc., which seem to be in line with progressive thought or action. Now, I don't know whether you managed, when you were in Iran, to determine, to grasp the nature of that enormous religious confrontation — I myself found it very difficult. The Iranians themselves are swimming in that ambiguity and

⁸³ Foucault refers to the Portuguese Revolution of 1974–76, which overthrew a fascist regime in power since the 1920s.

⁸⁴ This refers to the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), a Trotskyist party with links to the Belgian economist Ernest Mandel.

have several levels of language, commitment, expression, etc. There is the guy who says “Long Live Khomeini,” who is sincerely convinced about his religion; the guy who says “Long Live Khomeini, but I’m not particularly religious, Khomeini is just a symbol”; the guy who says “I’m fairly religious, I like Khomeini, but I prefer Shariatmadari,” who is a very different kind of figure; there is the girl who puts on the *chador* to show that she is against the regime and another girl, partly secularised, partly Muslim, who doesn’t put on the veil, but who will also say, “I’m a Muslim and Long Live Khomeini” . . . ;⁸⁵ among all these people there are different levels of thought. And yet everybody shouts, at one and the same time, with great fervour, “Long Live Khomeini,” and those different levels fall away.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: I don’t know whether you’ve read François Furet’s book on the French Revolution.⁸⁶ It’s a very intelligent book and might help us to sort out this confusion. He draws a distinction between the totality of the processes of economic and social transformation that began well before the revolution of 1789 and ended well after it, and the specificity of the revolutionary event. That’s to say, the specificity of what people experienced deep inside, but also of what they experienced in that sort of theatre that they put together from day to day and which constituted the revolution. I wonder whether this distinction might not be applied to some extent to Iran. It is true that Iranian society is shot through with contradictions that cannot in any way be denied, but it is certain that the revolutionary event that has been taking place for a year now, and which is at the same time an inner experience, a sort of constantly recommended liturgy, a community experience, and so on, all that is certainly articulated onto the class struggle: but that doesn’t find expression in an immediate, transparent way. So what role has religion, then, with the formidable grip that it has on people, the position that it has always held in relation to political power, its content, which makes it a religion of combat and sacrifice, and so on? Not that of an ideology, which would help to mask contradictions or form a sort of sacred union between a great many divergent interests. It really has been the vocabulary, the ceremonial, the timeless drama into which one could fit the historical drama of a people that pitted its very existence against that of its sovereign.

PIERRE BLANCHET: What struck me was the uprising of a whole population. I say *whole*. And if you take, for example, the demonstration of the ‘Ashura, add up the figures: take away young children, the disabled, the old and a proportion of women who stayed at home. You will then see that the whole of Tehran was in the streets shouting “Death to the king,” except the parasites who, really, lived off the regime. Even people who were with the regime for a very long time, who were for a constitutional monarchy as little as a month before, were shouting “Death to the king.” It was an astonishing, unique moment and one that must remain. Obviously, afterwards, things will settle down and different strata, different classes, will become visible.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: Among the things that characterise this revolutionary event, there is the fact that it has brought out — and few peoples in history have had this — an absolutely collective will. The collective will is a political myth with which jurists and philosophers try to analyse or to justify institutions, etc. It’s a theoretical tool: nobody has ever seen the “collective will” and, personally, I thought that the collective will was like God, like the soul, something one would never encounter. I don’t know whether you agree with me, but we met, in Tehran and throughout Iran, the collective will of a people. Well, you have to salute it; it doesn’t happen every day. Furthermore (and here one can speak of Khomeini’s political sense), this collective will has been given one object, one target and one only, namely, the departure of the shah. This collective will, which, in our theories, is always general, has found for itself, in Iran, an absolutely clear, particular aim, and has thus erupted into history. Of course, in the independence struggles, in the anticolonial wars, one finds similar phenomena. In Iran the national sentiment has been extremely vigorous: the rejection of submission to foreigners, disgust at the looting of national resources, the rejection of a dependent foreign policy, the American interference that was visible everywhere, have been determinants in the shah’s being perceived as a Western agent. But national feeling has, in my opinion, been only one of the elements of a still more radical rejection: the rejection by a people, not only of foreigners, but of everything that had constituted, for years, for centuries, its political destiny.

PIERRE BLANCHET: We went to China in 1967, at the height of the Lin Biao period, and, at that time, too, we had the feeling that there was the same type of collective will. In any case, something very strong

⁸⁵ Ellipsis points in original.

⁸⁶ The noted liberal historian François Furet (1927–97) had recently published a widely read interpretation of the French Revolution (1981).

was taking place, a very deep desire on the part of the whole Chinese people, for example, concerning the relationship between town and country, intellectuals and manual workers, that is to say, about all those questions that have now been settled in China in the usual, traditional way. At Beijing, we had the feeling that the Chinese were forming a people “in fusion.” Afterwards, we came to realise that we’d been taken in to some extent; the Chinese, too. It’s true that, to an extent, we took ourselves in. And that’s why, sometimes, we hesitate to allow ourselves to be carried away by Iran. In any case, there is something similar in the charisma of Mao Zedong and of Khomeini; there is something similar in the way the young Islamic militants speak of Khomeini and the way the Red Guards spoke of Mao.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: All the same, the Cultural Revolution was certainly presented as a struggle between certain elements of the population and certain others, certain elements in the party and certain others, or between the population and the party, etc. Now what struck me in Iran is that there is no struggle between different elements. What gives it such beauty, and at the same time such gravity, is that there is only one confrontation: between the entire people and the state threatening it with its weapons and police. One didn’t have to go to extremes, one found them there at once, on the one side, the entire will of the people, on the other the machine guns. The people demonstrated, the tanks arrived. The demonstrations were repeated, and the machine-guns fired yet again. And this occurred in an almost identical way, with, of course, an intensification each time, but without any change of form or nature. It’s the repetition of the demonstration. The readers of Western newspapers must have tired of it fairly soon. Oh, another demonstration in Iran! But I believe the demonstration, in its very repetition, had an intense political meaning. The very word *demonstration* must be taken literally: a people was tirelessly *demonstrating* its will. Of course, it was not only because of the demonstrations that the shah left. But one cannot deny that it was because of an endlessly demonstrated rejection. There was in these demonstrations a link between collective action, religious ritual, and an expression of public right. It’s rather like in Greek tragedy, where the collective ceremony and the reenactment of the principles of right go hand in hand. In the streets of Tehran there was an act, a political and juridical act, carried out collectively within religious rituals — an act of deposing the sovereign.

PIERRE BLANCHET: On the question of the collective will, what struck me — I was both spellbound by Iran and, sometimes, too, somewhat irritated — is when, for example, the students came and said, “We are all the same, we are all one, we are all for the Quran, we are all Muslims, there’s no difference between us. Make sure you write that, that we’re all the same.” Yet we knew perfectly well that there were differences, we knew perfectly well, for example, that the intellectuals, a section of the *bazaaris*, and the middle classes were afraid to go too far. And yet they followed. That’s what needs explaining.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: Of course. There’s a very remarkable fact in what is happening in Iran. There was a government that was certainly one of the best endowed with weapons, the best served by a large army that was astonishingly faithful compared with what one might think, there was a police that was certainly not very efficient, but whose violence and cruelty often made up for a lack of subtlety: it was, moreover, a regime directly supported by the United States; lastly, it had the backing of the whole world, of the countries large and small that surrounded it. In a sense, it had everything going for it, plus, of course, oil, which guaranteed the state an income that it could use as it wished. Yet, despite all this, a people rose up in revolt: it rose up, of course, in a context of crisis, of economic difficulties, etc., but the economic difficulties in Iran at that time were not sufficiently great for people to take to the streets, in their hundreds of thousands, in their millions, and face the machine-guns bare-chested. That’s the phenomenon that we have to talk about.

PIERRE BLANCHET: In comparative terms, it may well be that our own economic difficulties are greater than those in Iran at the time.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: Perhaps. Yet, whatever the economic difficulties, we still have to explain why there were people who rose up and said: We’re not having any more of this. In rising up, the Iranians said to themselves — and this perhaps is the soul of the uprising: “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 organisation, 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.” I believe that it is here that Islam played a role. It may be that one or other of its obligations, one or other of its codes exerted a certain fascination. But, above all, in relation to the way of life that was theirs, religion for them was like the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity.

Shi'ism is precisely a form of Islam that, with its teaching and esoteric content, distinguishes between what is mere external obedience to the code and what is the profound spiritual life; when I say that they were looking to Islam for a change in their subjectivity, this is quite compatible with the fact that traditional Islamic practice was already there and already gave them their identity; in this way they had of living the Islamic religion as a revolutionary force, there was something other than the desire to obey the law more faithfully, there was the desire to renew their entire existence by going back to a spiritual experience that they thought they could find within Shi'ite Islam itself. People always quote Marx and the opium of the people. The sentence that immediately preceded that statement and which is never quoted says that religion is the spirit of a world without spirit. Let's say, then, that Islam, in that year of 1978, was not the opium of the people precisely because it was the spirit of a world without a spirit.⁸⁷

CLAIRE BRIÈRE: By way of illustrating what you just said — “A demonstration there is really a demonstration” — I think we should use the word *witness*. People are always talking about Hussein in Iran. Now who is Hussein? A “demonstrator,” a witness — a martyr — who, by his suffering, demonstrates against evil and whose death is more glorious than the life of his victor. The people who demonstrated with their bare hands were also witnesses. They bore witness to the crimes of the shah, of the SAVAK, the cruelty of the regime that they wanted to get rid of, of the evil that this regime personified.

PIERRE BLANCHET: There seems to me to be a problem when one speaks of Hussein. Hussein was a martyr, he's dead. By endlessly shouting “Martyr, Martyr,” the Iranian population got rid of the shah. It's incredible and unprecedented. But what can happen now? Everybody isn't just going to shout “Martyr, Martyr” until everybody dies and there's a military coup d'état. With the shah out of the way, the movement will necessarily split apart.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: There'll come a moment when the phenomenon that we are trying to apprehend and which has so fascinated us — the revolutionary experience itself — will die out. There was literally a light that lit up in all of them and which bathed all of them at the same time. That will die out. At that point, different political forces, different tendencies will appear, there'll be compromises, there'll be this or that; I have no idea who will come out on top, and I don't think there are many people who can say now. It will disappear. There'll be processes at another level, another reality in a way. What I meant is that what we witnessed was not the result of an alliance, for example, between various political groups. Nor was it the result of a compromise between social classes that, in the end, each giving into the other on this or that, came to an agreement to claim this or that thing. Not at all. Something quite different has happened. A phenomenon has traversed the entire people and will one day stop. At that moment, all that will remain are the different political calculations that each individual had had in his head the whole time. Let's take the activist in some political group. When he was taking part in one of those demonstrations, he was double: he had his political calculation, which was this or that, and at the same time he was an individual caught up in that revolutionary movement, or rather that Iranian who had risen up against his king. And the two things did not come into contact, he did not rise up against his king because his party had made this or that calculation.

CLAIRE BRIÈRE: One of the significant examples of this movement is what has happened in the case of the Kurds. The Kurds, a majority of whom are Sunnis, and whose autonomist tendencies have long been known, have used the language of this uprising, of this movement. Everybody thought they would be against it, whereas they have supported it, saying: “Of course we are Sunnis, but above all we are Muslims.” When people spoke to them of their Kurdish specificity, their reaction was almost one of anger, or rejection. “What! We are Kurds!” they replied to you in Kurdish and the interpreter had to translate from Kurdish, “No, not at all, we are Iranians above all, and we share all the problems of Iran; we want the king to go.” The slogans in Kurdistan were exactly the same as those in Tehran or Mashad. “Long Live Khomeini,” “Death to the Shah.”

MICHEL FOUCAULT: I knew some Iranians in Paris, and what struck me about a lot of them was their fear. Fear that it would be known that they were consorting with left-wing people, fear that the agents of SAVAK might learn that they were reading this or that book, and so on. When I arrived in Iran, immediately after the September massacres, I said to myself that I was going to find a terrorised city, because there had been four thousand dead. Now I can't say that I found happy people, but there was an absence of fear and

⁸⁷ Foucault refers to Marx's comment on religion, just before the one about the “opium of the people,” but less widely known: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people” (1843, 175).

an intensity of courage, or rather, the intensity that people were capable of when danger, though still not removed, had already been transcended. In their revolution they had already transcended the danger posed by the machine-gun that constantly faced all of them.

PIERRE BLANCHET: Were the Kurds still with the Shi'ites? Was the National Front still with the clerics? Was the intelligentsia still following Khomeini? If there are twenty thousand dead and the army reacts, if there's a civil war lurking below the surface or an authoritarian Islamic Republic, there's a risk that we'll see some curious swings back. It will be said, for example, that Khomeini forced the hand of the National Front. It will be said that Khomeini did not wish to respect the wishes of the middle classes and intelligentsia for compromise. All these things are either true or false.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: That's right. It will be true and, at the same time, not true. The other day, someone said to me, "Everything you think about Iran isn't true, and you don't realise that there are communists everywhere." But I do know this. I know that in fact there are a lot of people who belong to communist or Marxist-Leninist organisations — there's no denying that. But what I liked about your articles was that they didn't try to break up this phenomenon into its constituent elements; they tried to leave it as a single beam of light, even though we know that it is made up of several beams. That's the risk and the interest in talking about Iran.

PIERRE BLANCHET: Let me give you an example. One evening, we went out after the curfew with a very Westernised, forty-year-old woman, who had lived in London and was now living in a house in northern Tehran. One evening, during the pre-Muharram period, she came to where we were living, in a working-class district. Shots were being fired on every side. We took her into the back streets, to see the army, to see the ordinary people, the shouts from the rooftops. It was the first time she had been in that district on foot. It was the first time she had spoken with such ordinary people, people who cried out *Allah O Akbar*.⁸⁸ She was completely overcome, embarrassed that she was not wearing a *chador*, not because she was afraid that someone might throw vitriol in her face, but because she wanted to be like the other women. It wasn't so much the episode of the *chador* that is important, but what those people said to us. They spoke in a very religious way and always said at the end, "May God keep you" and other such religious expressions. She replied in the same way, with the same language. She said to us, "This is the first time I have ever spoken like that." She was very moved.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: Yet, one day, all this will become, for historians, a rallying of the upper classes to a popular, left-wing movement, etc. That will be an analytical truth. I believe it is one of the reasons why one feels a certain unease when one comes back from Iran and people, wanting to understand, ask one for an analytical schema of an already constituted reality.

CLAIRE BRIÈRE: I'm thinking of another interpretative grid that we Western journalists have often had. This movement has followed such an odd logic that, on several occasions, Western observers have ignored it. The day of the National Front strike, in November, which had been a failure. Or the fortieth day of mourning of Black Friday. Black Friday had been terrible. One could imagine how the fortieth day of mourning would be very moving, very painful. Now, on the fortieth day, many shops were reopened and people didn't seem particularly sad. Yet the movement began again with its own logic, its own rhythm, its own breathing. It seemed to me that in Iran, despite the hectic rhythm at Tehran, the movement followed a rhythm that might be compared with that of a man — they walked like a single man — who breathes, gets tired, gets his breath back, resumes the attack, but really with a collective rhythm. On that fortieth day of mourning, there was no great demonstration of mourning. After the massacre in Djaleh Square, the Iranians were getting their breath back. The movement was relaunched by the astonishing contagion of the strikes that began about that time. Then there was the start of the new academic year, the angry reaction of the Tehran population, which set fire to Western symbols.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: Another thing that struck me as odd was the way the weapon of oil was used. If there was one immediately sensitive spot, it was oil, which was both the cause of the evil and the absolute weapon. One day we may know what happened. It certainly seems that the strike and its tactics had not been calculated in advance. On the spot, without there being any order coming from above, at a given moment, the workers went on strike, coordinating among themselves, from town to town, in an absolutely free way. Indeed it wasn't a strike in the strict sense of a cessation of work and an interruption of production. It was

⁸⁸ God Is Great.

clearly the affirmation that the oil belonged to the Iranian people and not to the shah or to his clients or partners. It was a strike in favour of national reappropriation.

CLAIRE BRIÈRE: Then, on the contrary, for it would not be honest to be silent about it, it must be said that when I, an individual, a foreign journalist, a woman, was confronted by this oneness, this common will, I felt an extraordinary shock, mentally and physically. It was as if that oneness required that everyone conform to it. In a sense, it was woe betide anyone who did not conform. We all had problems of this kind in Iran. Hence, perhaps, the reticence that people often feel in Europe. An uprising is all very fine, yes, but . . .⁸⁹

MICHEL FOUCAULT: There were demonstrations, verbal at least, of violent anti-Semitism. There were demonstrations of xenophobia and directed not only at the Americans, but also at foreign workers who had come to work in Iran.

PIERRE BLANCHET: This is indeed the other side of the unity that certain people may find offensive. For example, once, one of our photographers got punched in the face several times because he was thought to be an American. "No, I'm French," he protested. The demonstrators then embraced him and said, "Above all, don't say anything about this in the press." I'm thinking, too, of the demonstrators' imperious demands: "Make sure you say that there were so many thousand victims, so many million demonstrators in the streets."

CLAIRE BRIÈRE: That's another problem: it's the problem of a different culture, a different attitude to the truth. Besides it's part of the struggle. When your hands are empty, if you pile up the dead, real and imaginary, you ward off fear, and you become all the more convincing.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: They don't have the same regime of truth as ours, which, it has to be said, is very special, even if it has become almost universal. The Greeks had their own. The Arabs of the Mahgreb have another. And in Iran it is largely modelled on a religion that has an exoteric form and an esoteric content. That is to say, everything that is said under the explicit form of the law also refers to another meaning. So not only is saying one thing that means another not a condemnable ambiguity; it is, on the contrary, a necessary and highly prized additional level of meaning. It's often the case that people say something that, at the factual level, isn't true, but which refers to another, deeper meaning, which cannot be assimilated in terms of precision and observation . . .⁹⁰

CLAIRE BRIÈRE: That doesn't bother me. But I am irritated when I am told over and over again that all minorities will be respected and when, at the same time, they aren't being respected. I have one particularly strong memory — and I am determined all the same that it will appear somewhere — of the September demonstration when, as a woman, I was veiled. I was wearing a *chador*. They tried to stop me getting into the truck with the other reporters. I'd had enough of walking. When I was in the truck, the demonstrators who were around us tried to stop me standing up. Then some guy starting yelling — it was hateful — because I was wearing sandals without socks: I got an enormous impression of intolerance. Yet there were about fifty people around us saying: "She's a reporter, she has to be in the procession, there's no reason why she can't be in the truck." But when people speak to you about Jews — it's true that there was a lot of anti-Semitic talk — that they will tolerate them only if they don't support Israel, when anonymous notes are sent out, the credibility of the movement is somewhat affected. It's the strength of the movement to be a single unity. As soon as it perceives slight differences, it feels threatened. I believe the intolerance is there — and necessary.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: What has given the Iranian movement its intensity has been a double register. On the one hand, a collective will that has been very strongly expressed politically and, on the other hand, the desire for a radical change in ordinary life. But this double affirmation can only be based on traditions, institutions that carry a charge of chauvinism, nationalism, exclusiveness, which have a very powerful attraction for individuals. To confront so fearsome an armed power, one mustn't feel alone, nor begin with nothing. Apart from the problem of the immediate succession to the shah, there is another question that interests me at least as much: Will this unitary movement, which, for a year now has stirred up a people faced with machine-guns, have the strength to cross its own frontiers and go beyond the things on which, for a time, it has based itself? Are those limits, are those supports going to disappear once the initial enthusiasm wanes, or are they, on the contrary, going to take root and become stronger? Many here and some in Iran are waiting for and hoping for the moment when secularisation will at last come back to the fore and reveal the good, old type of revolution we have always known. I wonder how far they will be taken along this

⁸⁹ Ellipsis points in original.

⁹⁰ Ellipsis points in original.

strange, unique road, in which they seek, against the stubbornness of their destiny, against everything they have been for centuries, “something quite different.”

Open Letter to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan
First published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, April 14, 1979.

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

Last September, after several thousand men and women had just been machine-gunned in the streets of Tehran, you granted me an interview at the home of Ayatollah Shariatmadari in Qom. Around a dozen of those working for human rights had sought refuge in his house. Soldiers holding machine guns were guarding the entrance to the alley.

You were then President of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights. You needed courage. You needed physical courage, for prison awaited you, and you already knew it. You needed political courage, for the American president had recently enlisted the shah as one of the defenders of human rights.⁹¹ Today, many Iranians are angry that they are being given such noisy lectures. As to their rights, they showed that they knew how to make them prevail, they alone. They also refused to think that sentencing a young black man in racist South Africa equals the sentencing of a murderer from the SAVAK in Tehran. Who would not understand them?

A few weeks ago you ordered a halt to summary trials and hasty executions. Justice and injustice are the sensitive point of any revolution. Revolutions are born from justice and injustice and it is because of these that often they get lost and die. Since you thought it appropriate to allude to it in public, I felt the need to remind you of the conversation that we had on this topic.

We discussed all the regimes that oppressed people while claiming to defend human rights. You expressed a hope that in the desire to form an Islamic government, so widely supported by Iranians at the time, a true guarantee for these rights could be found. You gave three reasons for this. A spiritual dimension, you said, pervaded the revolt of a people where each one risked everything for an entirely different world. (And for many, this “everything” was neither less nor more than themselves.) It was not the desire to be ruled by a “government of mullahs” — I believe that you indeed used this expression. What I saw, from Tehran to Abadan, did not contradict your words, far from it.

Concerning these rights, you also said that Islam, in its historical profundity and its contemporary dynamism, was capable of facing the formidable challenge that socialism had not addressed any better than capitalism, and that is the least that could be said. “Impossible,” some say today, who pretend to know a lot about Islamic societies or about the nature of all religion.⁹² I will be a lot more modest than them, not seeing in the name of what universality Muslims could be prevented from seeking their future in an Islam whose new face they will have to shape with their own hands. 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 — frees it from its obligations.

You said that by invoking Islam, a government would thereby create important limitations upon its basic sovereignty over civil society, due to obligations grounded in religion. By virtue of its Islamic character, this government would be aware that it was linked to supplementary “obligations.” It would also respect these links, because the people could use against the government this very religion that it shares with them. This idea seemed important to me. Personally, I am somewhat skeptical concerning the extent to which governments will respect their obligations. However, it is good that the governed can rise up to remind everyone that they did not simply give up their rights to the one who governs, but that they are determined to impose obligations on him. No government can escape these fundamental obligations and, from this point of view, the trials taking place today in Iran do not fail to cause concern.

Nothing is more important in the history of a people than the rare moments when it rises up collectively in order to bring down a regime that it no longer supports. On the other hand, nothing is more important for the daily life of a people than those moments, so frequent, when the public authorities turn against an individual, proclaiming him their enemy and deciding to bring him down. Never do the public authorities have more essential obligations that they need to respect than in such moments. Political trials

⁹¹ The shah had made a state visit to Washington in January 1978. President Jimmy Carter termed him a defender of human rights, while Iranian students demonstrated in the streets outside.

⁹² This is very likely a reference to Rodinson.

are always the touchstone, not because the accused are never criminals, but because here the public authorities operate without a mask. They submit themselves to judgment when they judge their enemies.

The public authorities always affirm that they need to be respected, and it is precisely here that they must be absolutely respectful. The right of defending the people that the public authorities invoke also gives them very heavy obligations.

It is necessary — and it is urgent — to give the one being prosecuted as many means of defence and as many rights as possible. Is he “obviously guilty”? Does he have the whole of public opinion against him? Is he hated by his people? This, precisely, confers on him rights, all the more intangible ones. It is the obligation of the one who governs to explain and to guarantee them to the accused. For a government, there can be no “vilest of men.”

It is also the obligation of every government to show to all — that is, to the most humble, the most obstinate, the most blind of those it governs — under what conditions, how, and in the name of what authority it can claim for itself the right to punish in its name. Even though a punishment that one refuses to explain can be justified, it will still be an injustice, both toward the one who is sentenced and toward all those subject to trial.

Concerning this obligation by a government to submit itself to judgment when it claims to judge, I believe that it must accept it with respect to all men in the world. No more than I do, would I imagine that you would allow a principle of sovereignty that would have to justify itself only to itself. To govern is not self-evident, any more than to sentence, any more than to kill. It is good that a man, any man, even if he is on the other side of the world, can rise to speak because he no longer can stand to see another tortured or condemned. This is not about interfering in the internal affairs of a state. Those who protested on behalf of a single Iranian tortured in the depths of a SAVAK prison were interfering in the most universal matter of all.

Perhaps it will be said that the majority of the Iranian people shows that it has confidence in the regime that is being established and therefore also in its judicial practices. The fact of being accepted, supported, and voted for overwhelmingly does not attenuate the obligations of governments. Rather, it imposes stricter ones on them.

Evidently, Mr. Prime Minister, I do not have any authority to address myself in such a manner to you, except the permission that you gave me, by helping me understand, at our first meeting, that for you, governing is not a coveted right, but an extremely difficult obligation. You have to do what is necessary in order that the people will never regret the uncompromising force with which it has just liberated itself.