

There Can't Be Societies Without Uprisings

Translated by Alex J. Feldman

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Sassine: Let's talk about Iran. Close to ten months have passed since you first took up a position on the Iranian revolution, right? At first, your position scandalised the French intellectual scene, and afterwards it left a strong impression there. In those ten months, we've witnessed the departure of the sovereign of Iran and the attempt by the mullahs to set up a government, a possibility you yourself had evoked, while refusing to reduce the Iranian uprising¹ to it. Elsewhere in the world, there was the uprising in Nicaragua, the drama of the refugees from Indochina... Perhaps it's time to evaluate, in hindsight, the various positions you've taken on Iran. What first led you to be interested in Iran?

Foucault: Quite simply, I read a book. It's nothing new, but I hadn't read it yet. Thanks to an accident and a period of convalescence, I had the time to read it carefully last summer. It's Ernst Bloch's book, *The Principle of Hope*.² It really left an impression on me because, after all, the book remains rather unknown in France, and it's had relatively little influence. And yet it seems to me that the problem it poses is absolutely crucial. I mean, the problem of that collective perception of history that begins to emerge in Europe during the Middle Ages, most likely. It involves perceiving another world here below, perceiving that the reality of things is not definitively established and set in place, but instead, in the very midst of our time and our history, there can be an opening, a point of light drawing us towards it that gives us access, from this world itself, to a better world. Now, this perception of history is at once a point of departure for the idea of revolution and, on the other hand, an idea with a religious origin. Religious groups and especially dissident religious groups were basically the ones who held this idea — that within the world of the here-below, something like a revolution was possible. Yes, that's it. Well, this theme really interested me because I think it's true historically, even if Ernst Bloch doesn't really demonstrate all that in a very satisfying way, in terms of the methods of academic history. I think it's an idea that is, all the same...

Sassine: We owe the idea to the sixteenth century, but in particular to religious groups.

Foucault: Oh, it begins well before the sixteenth century, since in the end the great popular revolts of the Middle Ages were already organised around this theme. It begins in the twelfth or thirteenth century, but obviously it blows up around the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and it cuts across all the wars of religion. So, well, I was in the middle of reading about all that when the newspapers informed me that something like an

¹ [Translator's note: *soulèvement*. The term occurs more than 50 times in this interview, not including related forms such as *se soulever* and *se lever* (to rise up, to get up or stand up). Foucault is obviously exploring the notion developed in detail in "Inutile de se soulever?" *Le Monde* 10661 (1979), 1–2, reprinted in *Dits et écrits 2: 1976–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (2001), 790–797 (hereafter abbreviated *DE 2*). In *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. James D. Faubion (2000), 449–453, this essay is translated under the title "Useless to Revolt?" and the term *soulèvement* is consistently rendered as 'revolt'. A more recent translation by Karen de Bruin and Kevin B. Anderson, included as an appendix in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islam* (2005), 263–267, renders the title "Is It Useless to Revolt?" but this time translates *soulèvement* as 'uprising'. Although Foucault does not explicitly distinguish *soulèvement* and *révolte*, he obviously favours the first term, which is related to (*se*) *lever*, to raise, to rise, whereas 'revolt' suggests a mere turning around and is closer etymologically to *révolution*, against which *soulèvement* is pitted in the essay in *Le Monde*. The Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé notes that *soulèvement* can also mean a collective expression of indignation or excitement, as in *un soulèvement de l'opinion publique* (Guizot)—an outcry of public opinion ('Soulèvement', Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, accessed 15 January 2016, <http://cnrtl.fr/definition/soul%C3%A8vement>). We have tried as much as possible to use 'uprising', 'rising up' and 'rise up' in the translation of this interview.]

² Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung I-III* (1954–1959)/*The Principle of Hope* (1986). The French translation began to be published under Gallimard in 1976. Volumes II and III appeared in 1982 and 1991; the three volumes were translated from the German by Françoise Wuilmart.

uprising was taking place in Iran. And this uprising stood out because it wasn't obviously governed by a Western revolutionary ideology, it wasn't governed or directed by a political party either, not even by political organisations — it truly was a mass uprising. An entire people was standing up against a system in power. And in the end the importance of the religious aspect, of religious institutions, of religious representation was... [inaudible]. So, it seemed to me that there was a relationship between what I was reading and what was taking place. And I wanted to go and see. And I really went to see it as an example, a test of what I was reading in Ernst Bloch. There you have it. So, you could say, I went there with one eye conditioned by this problem of the relationship between political revolution and religious hope or eschatology. All right.

Sassine: And starting from this way of seeing things — a vision that was theoretical, at first — did you go to Iran just one time?

Foucault: No, twice.

Sassine: You went there two times?

Foucault: For five weeks in total, as it turns out, five or six weeks.

Sassine: And did you meet a large sample of people there?

Foucault: Large? You know the people I would have been able to meet, as a Westerner, and in a moment like that. In other words, I obviously saw the academic areas of Teheran. In Teheran I saw a certain number of young men and women who were not part or were no longer part of the university and who were, shall we say, active in the revolutionary movement at that moment. I met some but finally quite few representatives from the political class. I met a certain number of people who would go on to become important figures in the new regime, such as Dr. Mehdi Bazargan or Dr. Kazem Sami Kermani.³

Sassine: Right.

Foucault: And then I went to Qom, where I met Shariatmadari.⁴ After that, I went to Abadan, where I met a small group of workers [inaudible]. I also met some people from the civil service in Teheran. Of course, I absolutely did not see what was happening in the provinces.

Sassine: Only the big cities then.

Foucault: So I only know... I've only seen things in Teheran, Qom, and Abadan.

Sassine: And once you were there, what was distinctive about the case of Iran? Did it confirm or go against your conclusions?

Foucault: Well, I believe that at that moment, and in much of the European analysis of the situation (or in France at any rate), there was this idea that ultimately the erosion of culture [*déculturation*] in Iran under the influence of the dictatorial regime of the Shah, the overly hasty industrialisation according to a Western model that was imposed too quickly, this erosion of culture had led — and then the disorganisation too, the political disorganisation — all of this had led to Islam's becoming in a way the minimum common vocabulary in which the Iranian people were expressing their claims, claims that were basically social and political. Put differently, since they weren't capable of having a revolutionary discourse, a revolutionary ideology, a revolutionary organisation in the Western sense of the term, well then, they would have withdrawn into Islam. That was an interpretation that I've heard many times; it was being reported all around me, but I believed it to be erroneous. Because it seemed to me that it wasn't some kind of mere vehicle, that in this movement Islam was not a mere vehicle for aspirations or ideologies that, at the bottom, were different. It wasn't just for want of anything better that Islam was being used to mobilise Muslims. I believe that there was indeed in this movement — a movement that was quite broadly popular, millions and millions of people accepting to go up against an army and a police force that were obviously all powerful — it seemed to me that there was something there that owed its force to... what you could call a... a will at once both political and religious, a bit like what occurred in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the Anabaptists both revolted against the political power they were facing and drew the force and the vocabulary of their

³ The engineer Mehdi Bazargan was the founder of the Freedom Movement of Iran in 1961 and of the Iranian Human Rights Association in 1977. Named prime minister by Ayatollah Khomeini on his return to Teheran, he remained in this position for just a few months (5 February–5 November 1979) because of his liberal and democratic ideas. Kazem Sami Kermani, doctor and psychiatrist, led the Iranian National Liberation Movement (JAMA), which was allied with Bazargan's Movement and affiliated with the National Front of Iran. He was the minister of health in the Bazargan government.

⁴ An Ayatollah who was considered to be the first among peers, Shariatmadari was for the separation of mosques and the state, and he was very interested in social and economic problems. In the words of Olivier Roy, he 'was literally "defrocked" by Khomeini'. See Sabrina Mervin, *Les mondes chi'ites et l'Iran* (2007), 39.

revolts from a religious belief, a profound and sincere religious aspiration. There you go, that's what I was trying to say.

Sassine: All right, now I'm going to ask you a few questions about your principal notions. I mean, those ideas that, I think, constituted the base of the theoretical issues that concerned you in Iran. I have in mind basically three concepts (let me know if there were others): the general will, Islamic government, and political spirituality. Let's consider these three. So, what struck you, especially at the beginning, was the existence of a general will borne by a people. You say that you believed such a will was an abstraction, that it existed only, like God, in books, and yet there you saw it on the ground.⁵

Foucault: As a European, I've always, you could say, seen the general will delegated, represented, or confiscated by a political class, by political organisations, or by political leaders. And I believe that — let's be cynical here for a moment — the claim that de Gaulle represented France in 1940 is perhaps a fact, but I know well, even if I was a child then, that the general will of the French didn't lie in that direction [laughter]. France's being represented by de Gaulle was, shall we say, something politically desirable and historically fertile, but in reality it's not at all like that that things happened [laughter]. In our democracies, where deputies, ministers, presidents of the Republic speak in the name of the collectivity, of the state, and of society, the general will is all the same something we rarely feel.

Sassine: Yes, but...

Foucault: And in the political groups that claim to carry the fundamental aspirations of the population, you find a good deal of bureaucracy, of leadership, of hierarchy, a good deal of confiscation of power, etc. Now, it seemed to me, rightly or wrongly — and maybe I was entirely mistaken on this — that when the Iranians went out in the streets in September and stood before the tanks, they were doing that not because they were forced or constrained by someone. It wasn't a group who was taking the risk for them on the grounds that this group held the key to their identity; no, it was they themselves, they didn't want, they no longer wanted to put up with the regime. And so, even if I didn't go to the provinces, I believe that this was something that touched everyone, as you could see it in Teheran and a bit everywhere in Iran, according to what [inaudible] says in any case. Collectively, people wanted no more of it.

Sassine: And what characterised this general will? What was it based on? Only on the refusal of the sovereign?

Foucault: Well, there you have indeed the most difficult part to discuss. We could of course just say to ourselves that they no longer wanted that regime, that this general will boiled down to that. Now I believe, and perhaps I'm wrong here, that in fact they wanted something else. And this something else that they wanted, it was precisely neither another political regime nor a regime of mullahs more or less implicitly; what they wanted, what they had in the back of their heads or, you might say, what they'd set their sight on when they risked their lives in these protests — it seems to me that what they were after was a kind of eschatology. You could say that the form this general will took was not a will for a state or a political organisation; it was, so it seems to me, a sort of religious eschatology.

Sassine: ...that would also be realised on earth?

Foucault: Yes, you might say that this was what ultimately gave form and force to their will. It wasn't just a refusal of the current regime, a disgust in the face of the disarray, the waste, the corruption, the police, and the massacres. Right. This will also took shape, and it was by and large a religious eschatology.

Sassine: With respect to Islamic government, you say in your 'Open Letter to Mehdi Bazargan'⁶ that we've already said enough about the word 'government'. While the word 'Islamic' itself doesn't scare you, you say that between these two terms there could be a 'reconciliation, contradiction, or the threshold of something new'.⁷ Can you elaborate on these different possibilities and maybe say something about which of them is coming about?

⁵ [Editors' note: see Michel Foucault, "L'esprit d'un monde sans esprit," in *Iran: la révolution au nom de Dieu*, ed. Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet (1979), reprinted in *DE 2*, 746–747/"Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit", in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 252–253.]

⁶ Michel Foucault, "Lettre ouverte à Mehdi Bazargan," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 753 (1979), 46, reprinted in *DE 2*, 780–782/"Open Letter to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan," in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 260–263.

⁷ "In this will for an 'Islamic government', should one see a reconciliation, a contradiction or the threshold of something new?" (Michel Foucault, "À quoi rêvent les Iraniens?" *Le Nouvel Observateur* 727 (1978), reprinted in *DE 2*, 694/"What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?" in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 208.)

Foucault: All right, well, I think that this notion of Islamic government is indeed fairly ambiguous. And truth be told, when I posed the question — because everyone was talking to me about Islamic government, from Sami Kermani to Shariatmadari, and including Mehdi Bazargan too — everyone was telling me [inaudible] that what people want is an Islamic government. And, when you asked them what that consisted of, the answer was very vague, very hazy. And, even when it was underwritten by Shariatmadari's promise to do this or that, it wasn't very reassuring: it's not because people say 'We'll respect minorities' or 'We'll even tolerate the communists' that you should rest assured. I even think we should be worried when we hear that kind of thing. But that's not all there is to it. It seems to me that by Islamic government, people, as a mass, were looking for, were thinking about something that was essentially and ultimately a non-political form of coexistence, a way of living together [*vivre ensemble*], one that in no way resembles what we could call a Western political structure. Now, it was likely untenable in that form. Naturally, the risk was that this would all end up in a government in the hands of the mullahs. And, when I said, is this a contradiction or a possibility that we're on the brink of something new, I meant, is it possible, on the basis of something that is in itself so ambiguous, so hazy, something that risks falling straightaway into a government of the mullahs — is it possible to elaborate something from this? And, will the circumstances, the pressures of all kinds, political, economic, military, diplomatic, will all that allow Iran to work out a solution? It seems to me that there was at least one point in common among everyone, when people were talking about Islamic government, whether it was the workers from Abadan, Shariatmadari or Bazargan. And this point in common was that they were trying to find forms of coexistence, forms of social existence, forms of equality, etc. that didn't follow the Western model.

Sassine: Could we call that, without referring to anyone in particular, a sort of stateless society [*société sans État*]?

Foucault: If you'd like to, yes, sure, absolutely. Absolutely. Once more, everything was very vague and it was necessarily very confused.

Sassine: But does Islam, which is generally presented and which presents itself at times as both a religion and a state, does this religion that presents itself as a *summum* of the doctrine of power not carry in itself the possibility of the limitation of every power of the state?

Foucault: At any rate, that's what people were always telling me when I was there. And I was assured that Islam being what it is, it couldn't in itself harbour any of the dangers that are inherent to the subtle, reflected, balanced forms of a Western democracy. That's what I was told. Anyway, I found this sort of hope that, once again, is so similar in its form to what you find in Europe in the sixteenth century. It seems to me that this is...

Sassine: Well, let's move on to a notion that hasn't exactly got people clamouring to give you flowers [laughter]: political spirituality.⁸ Could you say a bit about how one politicises the spiritual and spiritualises politics?

Foucault: You know, one day without a doubt I'll write a study on the incredible reactions of the French with respect to my position about Iran. I don't know how people reacted in other countries in Europe, but in France it was all quite mad. It was an example of something that... people were really beside themselves. You know, for three different journalists, who certainly aren't mediocre, to end up fabricating things about my own texts and then attributing that to me... And in the end, they made this stuff up, with sentences that I hadn't written, with texts that didn't come from me, with words that weren't my own, attributing them to me in order to demonstrate I approved of the executions of Jews, that it could be said that I approved the actions of the Islamic tribunals, etc. In respectable newspapers. So, in the end, people went mad.

Sassine: How do you explain that madness?

Foucault: Well that's something I would really like to talk to you about. I don't have an explanation. And again the other day, yesterday, I saw a journalist from a paper, a weekly, someone I met in Iran, and I asked, 'How do you explain the attitude of your colleagues?' He's Jewish, and he told me: 'Oh, I think that it's the hatred of Islam.'

⁸ [Editors' note: in his writings on the Iranian Revolution, Foucault uses this expression only once, in the conclusion of his article "À quoi rêvent les Iraniens?", 694/"What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?", 209, which reads: "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 [Westerners] have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity, a political spirituality. I can already hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong."]

Sassine: There's a book, I'm citing it because I reviewed it last week in the paper. It's called *Orientalism*...⁹

Foucault: Right. By Edward Said. I know Edward Said. I know the book.

Sassine: Ah, you know Edward Said!

Foucault: Yes, it's a really interesting book. Well, ultimately I don't know, in any case, people went mad. The sentence I wrote concerning political spirituality was this: I said that what I had found over there was something like the search for a political spirituality, and I said that this notion, which is now entirely obscure for us, was entirely clear and familiar in the sixteenth century.¹⁰ OK, there's no reason to get worked up about that. Instead, you might tell me: 'It's not true, they're not seeking a political spirituality.' But to go and say, as was said recently in *Le Monde*...

Sassine: Claude Roy?

Foucault: Claude Roy.¹¹ It's an enormous lie. And they've never apologised for it and they never will. But it will always affect me. I've never personally aspired, whatever they say, to a political spirituality. I said that over there I saw a very curious movement, very bizarre, something I believe we can't understand except by analogy with things that happened here [inaudible] political spirituality. You have a superb example of it, which we haven't entirely forgotten since it still has a certain contemporary relevance for us: Calvinism. What is Calvin if not a will to convey not simply a religious belief, not simply a religious organisation, but an entire form of spirituality, that is, an individual relationship to God and to spiritual values, to convey all that into politics? Well, Calvinism, that's what its project was, [inaudible] religious movement. That's what happened in the West. That's what took place in the West and it's what, or so it seems to me, was in the movement of 1978 in Iran. Personally, [laughter] I've never thought that political spirituality could currently be, how to put it, an aspiration...

Sassine: An answer.

Foucault: ...a possible or desirable answer or aspiration in the West. We're a thousand leagues from it. The best proof that we're a thousand leagues from it is that we have to make historical references in order to try to make it understandable. Second, I never claimed that political spirituality was the solution, even to the problems of Iran. Just re- member what happened in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: things don't turn out as we'd expect, and what happened led to some rough things. Political spirituality was never paradise on earth. Look at Calvin and his political spirituality: some people got burned at the stake [laughter]. OK, there you go. To put it differently, I described something I saw in Iran. Maybe I was wrong, and I accept that we could argue about it. But to want to impute to me, as a personal aspiration, what I was describing as a will or an aspiration proper to Iran (or so it seems to me) — that comes down to a dishonesty [inaudible].

Sassine: But, all the same, you described the movement sympathetically?

Foucault: [Silence.]

Sassine: No, I say that...

Foucault: Absolutely.

Sassine: ...because the positions you took were a great comfort for us in the context of the hostility you yourself describe to this revolution. You were the only one to say something truly new in the way of analysis, by saying that those who were going out into the streets weren't fanatics, and that it was the return of Islam...

Foucault: Yes, right, you can say, on the one hand, because I don't believe you can ever understand something well if you're hostile to it. And if I had had a feeling of hostility about all that, I would never have gone there because I certainly wouldn't have understood it. Second, it seems to me in fact that there's a risk, at any rate a possibility that now, in the countries called 'Third World', violent and intense revolutionary movements of social and political change will try to take hold more and more on the cultural basis of these countries, rather than trying to model themselves on the West, the liberal or Marxist West. I think that's what risks spreading. What's in the process of spreading. In Afghanistan [inaudible] of that type [inaudible] Marxist [inaudible] an entire branch [inaudible]. Right, it seems to me that we have... if only from a properly historical point of view, shall we say, we need to take seriously, to pay attention to what is happening. But, third and finally, if I had sympathy beyond this historical and political curiosity, it's because I think in fact that, given what the Shah's regime was, its political and economic oppression, its exploitation of the population and its masked imperialism, etc. — well, that an entire people should revolt against this regime

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978). The book was translated into French in 1980.

¹⁰ [Editors' note: see note 8.]

¹¹ [Editors' note: see Claude Roy, "Les débordements du divin", *Le Monde* 10717 (1979).]

is a good thing. And I'll even say a very good thing: to the extent Islam at least allowed this, it's because the people as a whole participated actively. They recognised themselves in it. It seems to me that this movement had echoes right down to the Iranian countryside in the sense that it referred to something that people recognised as theirs. Whereas if the movement had been made in the name of the class struggle, or in the name of freedoms, I'm not sure if it would have had the same echo or the same force. Those are the reasons why I was sympathetic, but this sympathy never went so far as to say that, one, we should imitate all that and, two, that what was going to come out of it would be paradise on earth — far from it, far from it. I simply made a judgement of reality about a force I'd noticed and whose immediate objectives I couldn't but subscribe to, since its immediate objectives were the overthrow of the imperialist regime, that regime of exploitation, of...

Sassine: ...massacres.

Foucault: ...that regime of police terror.

Sassine: So — maybe we'll have a chance to come back to this — you situate yourself entirely outside of the whole current that is called the return to the sacred?

Foucault: Absolutely. I have never taken any position... I think, you might say, that for someone in the West... In any case, I, as a Westerner, consider that my attitude about religion isn't anyone's business, and I've never taken any public political stand or any public political position on the matter. I've never spoken about it. And I am, you could say, at the same time too historical and too relativist to have the absurd idea [laughter] to turn what I saw in Iran into the banner of a new prophetism: let's return to the sacred [inaudible]. All that, in principle, it doesn't concern me. At any rate, I'm not doing it. I tried to describe what I saw. The problem is to know why what was happening over there, the reality over there, constituted such a wound for the West. To the point that I, who was describing this reality, [inaudible] I could be considered a kind of fanatical prophet.

Sassine: And you don't have any explanation for why all of that happened?

Foucault: No, I continue to be very, very sceptical, very embarrassed by what is happening. When I talk to people, many of whom are, of course, somewhat close to me, many of them are completely nauseated by the incredible stupidity, the blindness with which journalists always [inaudible] absolutely the same thing about what's happening in Iran. Here's an entirely typical example: two months ago, on a peripheral radio station, I heard the following information: 'The regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini has just cancelled the order of two Concorde airplanes or two nuclear power plants (I don't know), but the government of Mr. Bazargan has assured that the contracts will be respected.' So, for the contracts that are respected, we have the Bazargan government, and for the cancelled contracts, it's the regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini [laughter]. Isn't that sublime?

Sassine: It is.

Foucault: It sure is.

Sassine: You've never met him personally?

Foucault: The Ayatollah Khomeini? No. I didn't meet him, for one, because what interested me, you might say, was to see what was happening there. I knew, first, that the Ayatollah Khomeini wasn't saying much. Besides, he was a political figure whose declarations were prepared in advance by his entourage and were supposed to have a certain political meaning. I read what he had to say in the papers. I knew perfectly well that a conversation with him would lead to nothing. The problem once again was not to know what was in the heads of the leaders of the movement, but to know how those people who were literally making the revolution and making it, so it seems to me, on their own, were living.

Sassine: And in that sense, to conclude this question a bit, could Islam play a role as a guarantee against despotism, as people said to you?

Foucault: As people said to me... Well, listen: on that point personally I'm quite sceptical. My scepticism is tied first of all to my ignorance of Islam. Second, what I know of the history of Islam is not in itself more reassuring than the history of any other religion. And third, Islam, Shiite Islam in Iran, is not for that matter a sort of, shall we say, direct emanation from the time of the prophet. There's a history. The Shiite clergy have been linked to a whole range of forms of institutionalisation, ethnic domination, massacres, political and other sorts of privileges, etc. It's probable that the culture and education of the Shiite clergy is not very high. Given all that, I believe we should be a bit distrustful. But once again, that's a problem for Muslims; it's not mine. The problem for Muslims is to know if, on the basis of this cultural background and the current situation and general context, it's possible to draw from Islam and Islamic culture something like a new political form.

That's a problem that belongs to Muslims, and I believe it's the problem that a certain number of them, at least, among the most enlightened intellectuals, were quite intensely trying to resolve. It's that problem that Ali Shariati tried to pose.¹² It's what, it seems to me, was on Bazargan's mind when I spoke to him. It was also Shariatmadari's preoccupation. And I believe that the kind of attention, at once intense, mute, and full of apprehension, with which the Muslims I know in France are following the events in Iran is linked to the fact that if Iran fails, that is, if it falls apart into an authoritarian, retrograde, [inaudible], etc. regime of the mullahs, won't that then be the sign — or one of the signs at any rate — that resources for a new form of political society cannot be drawn from Islam, from Islamic culture? If Iran succeeds, then... Because what struck me was that if the French papers and the French in general said and showed so much hostility to what was happening in Iran, Muslims in Europe were quiet; they didn't speak much.

Sassine: But they were following what was happening sympathetically.

Foucault: Yes, I think they were following it sympathetically. But I believe that their silence was linked to the fact that they felt that the game that was playing out in Iran was very big, very important.

Sassine: And yet if...

Foucault: They must be seeing what's currently happening in Iran with a lot of, well, not rancour, but concern and bitterness.

Sassine: Oh, about that, I wanted — but I don't think it's worth it any more — to ask you a question about the particular role of Shiism as a doctrine and a form of organisation, even if it's not your domain. Well, let's go from there to a question a bit more general but linked to the first: in the context of French opinion, the theme of Islam is already poorly seen. How do you explain this incomprehension about the Iranian uprising and what you call the fear of what's irreducible in it? That is, with that we move, don't we, to the idea of the irreducible.

Foucault: You mean in Islam?

Sassine: No, in the uprising.

Foucault: Ah, in the uprising. Oh yes, yes definitely!

Sassine: It's an idea that you give in your latest article in *Le Monde*.¹³

Foucault: Yes, right.

Sassine: It's an uprising where people are risking their lives — that aspect...

Foucault: Yes. OK, well, I... What I meant was that, of course, an uprising always has its reasons and its explanations, and trust me, if you're a historian of a Marxist bent, you lay out the conditions, the pressures, the reasons for which people rise up. All that [inaudible] valuable [inaudible], but it's not what I... Well, I mean that to grasp the moment where it's happening, when one tries to grasp the very lived experience [vécu] of the revolution, then there's something that cannot be brought back to an explanation or a reason. As miserable as people are, as threatened by dying from hunger as they may be, at the moment where they stand up and say: 'I prefer to die by machine gun fire than to die of hunger' — at that moment there's something that the threat of famine doesn't explain. Right: there is, you could say, a play [jeu] between sacrifice and hope for which each person, and a people collectively, is responsible. It establishes the degree of hope and of the acceptance of sacrifices that will allow a people to confront an army, a police [inaudible]. And that was, I believe, a quite singular phenomenon, one that disrupted history... Is it [the tape recorder] not working?

Sassine: Yes, it is, but I think we're getting to the end.

Foucault: Yes... Oh, but, there's still more... We're only halfway.

Sassine: OK. Why is European opinion incapable of taking that, in the sense of a boxer taking a blow?

Foucault: We could imagine that after the great... Because ultimately Europe lived, European [inaudible] lived off the principle of hope that was organised around the idea of a political revolution with parties, an army, an avant-garde, the proletariat, etc. Well, we know what deception that leads to. You could think that now, every form of uprising, whatever or wherever, as soon as it no longer treats these old forms as missions, [inaudible] hope, provokes at once a sort of irritation and you could even say a kind of cultural jealousy. They

¹² [Editors' note: the sociologist Ali Shariati was a member of the National Front and one of the founders of the Freedom Movement of Iran. He was one of the most influential Iranian intellectuals of the twentieth century and, even if he died in 1977, he is considered the 'ideologue' of the Iranian Revolution. See Foucault, "À quoi rêvent les Iraniens?", 693/"What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?", 207–208.]

¹³ See Foucault, "Inutile de se soulever?", 791/"Is It Useless to Revolt?", 263.

won't be able to bring about a real revolution of their own form, without us, since we have never been able to bring about the revolution according to our own form. We who invented the idea of revolution, we who elaborated it, we who have organised an entire body of knowledge, a political system, an entire mechanism of political parties, etc. around this idea of revolution. Well, you could give that as an explanation. I'm not sure it's true.

Sassine: In any case, your explanation would be true for certain organisations, but it's not true for the shock troops of anti-Iranianism?

Foucault: Yes.

Sassine: It would be true for the communists, for people on the left. Not for the right.

Foucault: Oh, no, of course not, but then again there you could say that they're generally hostile to every form of uprising.

Sassine: Well, if you don't mind, let's move on now to another thing. It's a bit more general, and we've already brought it up: the idea of an uprising [*soulèvement*]. You speak of the enigma of the uprising and you say that it's a matter of something outside of history. You write: 'The man who rises up is without explanation'.¹⁴ What do you mean by that? And why would it not be, as in La Boétie, the 'man who obeys' who constitutes the problem?

Foucault: You're right, but [laughter], I'd say... [Silence] Yes, right, you're asking a very serious, a very important question. Well, I'm going to answer it, without, however, being sure that my answer is the right one and without being sure that I'll always hold to it. I feel that ultimately you can find a thousand reasons why a man obeys and submits; you might even find me quite bluntly Hegelian: after all, that the slave prefers life to death and that he accepts slavery in order to continue to live, after all, isn't that the mechanism of all servitude? On the other hand, it strikes me as enigmatic, because it runs absolutely counter to the kind of obvious and simple calculation that consists in saying: I prefer to die rather than to die... I prefer to die by bullet than to die here, I prefer to die today by rising up rather than to vegetate under the goblet of the master for whom I am [inaudible]. Well, this dying rather than vegetating, this other death...

Sassine: In short, to die rather than to vegetate?

Foucault: Yes, well, finally, choosing death, possible death is something that implies, with respect to every habit, familiarity, calculation, acceptance, etc. that makes up the web of daily existence... it seems to me that this implies a rupture. And once again I think it's quite good and quite right that historians, economists, sociologists, those who analyse [inaudible] a society, I think it's good that all of these people explain the reasons, the motives, the themes, the conditions in which things unfolded. But once again the very gesture of rising up seems to me to be irreducible to these analyses. Indeed, when I said that it was outside history, I didn't mean that it was outside of time, I mean that it was outside of this group of analyses that we need to carry out, of course, but that never account entirely for an uprising...

Sassine: And on that point I see either a development in your analysis or two different levels. You speak a bit of François Furet and his analysis of the French Revolution: there were, for one, economic and social reasons for it that led to reforms later on.¹⁵ There was the fact of the revolution; that's one plane. And when you posit the idea of uprising, the inexplicable — that's another plane? Or, is it the same plane?

Foucault: I believe it's the same plane. I believe that this raises the problem, shall we say, of the revolutionary event. For a certain time in France, historians haven't liked the notion of the event [*événement*]. Their problem has been to reduce it. No, we need to come back to it. [Silence] A revolution is an event. It's an event that is lived by people. So, there came a moment where the French were conscious that they were making a revolution. And they made a revolution because they were conscious that they were doing so. That they were in the midst of doing something. Something that was politically important, that broke the old structures, etc. When they listened to a speech by Danton, when they rallied to the Jacobins, when they invaded the Assembly... Well, in Iran in 1978, when people went out into the streets, they knew that they

¹⁴ [Translator's note: the sentence in Foucault's article reads: "Et parce que l'homme qui se lève est finalement sans explication" (Foucault, "Inutile de se soulever?", 791). "The man in revolt is ultimately inexplicable" is the translation suggested by de Bruin and Anderson in "Is It Useless to Revolt?", 263. See note 1.]

¹⁵ [Editors' note: see François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (1978)/François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1981). Foucault refers to this book in "L'esprit d'un monde sans esprit", 745/"Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit", 252.]

were doing something, that what they were doing was a revolution or that it was an uprising, that it was at any rate a suspension of an entire part of their history.

Sassine: But isn't the decision to risk one's life something different from acting in a play?

Foucault: Of course, but what form this decision will take is, I also believe, one of the problems. Deciding to die when you're waging a revolution doesn't simply mean standing in front of a machine gun and waiting for it to fire. Deciding that you're going to die or that you prefer to die rather than to continue, well that takes a certain number of forms. It can take the form of organising a commando or guerrillas; it can also be the form of an individualised attack; it can be in the form of belonging to a mass movement; it can be the form of a religious demonstration, a funeral parade, etc. I'll call all this the dramaturgy of revolutionary lived experience [*vécu*], and we need to study it. And this dramaturgy is the visible expression of that kind of decision that makes a rupture in historical continuities, and a rupture that is the heart of the revolution.

Sassine: And so you assign an important role to consciousness in history.

Foucault: Well, yeah.

Sassine: The consciousness of the masses.

Foucault: Yes, absolutely.

Sassine: Well, here's a question that follows from the first. In your works, you seem to start with apparatuses of power, for which Castoriadis constantly reproaches you with a real rancour.¹⁶ I think it's first in an interview granted to *Les révoltes logiques* that you came to speak of the plebs [*plèbe*].¹⁷ Doesn't the element of uprising or revolt erupt from the exterior in your work, and could we say that the Iranian uprising has played a role in the use of this term?

Foucault: Listen, people are really, really strange. They never let you speak about anything other than what they themselves talk about [laughter]. When I talk of apparatuses [*dispositifs*] of power, I'm trying to study how they function in a society. I've never claimed that these apparatuses of power constitute the entirety of the life of a society. I've never claimed that they exhaust a society's history. I simply mean that, since they're what I'm studying, I want to know how they function. In this respect, it seems to me that the analyses of power carried out by many of the people you mentioned, people who invoke, for example, the state, or a social class, absolutely do not give an account of the complexity of the functioning of this phenomenon of power.

Sassine: But all the same, between the fact that you describe a mechanism of power, or an apparatus, and the fact that you show how (currently, for example, in the course on sexuality or in your latest interview that appeared in *L'Arc*)¹⁸ power isn't repressive but political when it comes to knowledge or to desire — well that is something much more interior, more inherent...

Foucault: Yes, but...

Sassine: ...than in *Discipline and Punish*, let's say.

Foucault: Well, yes... Indeed, in these recent texts... In *Discipline and Punish*, I tried to study the mechanism of disciplinary power. It was important, so it seems to me, at least in the societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In more recent texts, I've tried first of all to revisit the problem of power more generally. I've tried to show that power is in fact always a relational structure. Power isn't something that exists as a substance or as a property stocked up by a social class. Nor is power a kind of capacity that would be

¹⁶ [Editors' note: see Cornelius Castoriadis, "Les divertisseurs," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 658 (1977), reprinted in *La société française* (1979).]

¹⁷ "No doubt it would be mistaken to conceive the plebs [*plèbe*] as the permanent ground of history, the final objective of all subjections, the ever smouldering centre of all revolts. The plebs is no doubt not a real sociological entity. But there is indeed always something in the social body, in classes, groups and individuals themselves which in some sense escapes relations of power, something which is by no means a more or less docile or reactive primal matter, but rather a centrifugal movement, an inverse energy, a discharge. There is certainly no such thing as "the" plebs; rather there is, as it were, a certain plebeian quality or aspect ["de la" plebe]. There is plebs in bodies, in souls, in individuals, in the proletariat, in the bourgeoisie, but everywhere in a diversity of forms and extensions, of energies and irreducibilities" (Michel Foucault, "Pouvoirs et stratégies," *Les révoltes logiques* 4 (1977), reprinted in *DE 2*, 421/"Power and Strategies," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (1980), 137–138.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "Vérité et pouvoir," *L'Arc* 70 (1977), 16–26. [Translator's note: this text is an abridgement of an interview that first appeared in Italian in *Microfisica del potere* (1977). The complete French version can be found as "Entretien avec Michel Foucault," in *DE 2*, 140–160. An English translation from the complete Italian version can be found as "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge*, 109–133.]

produced by an apparatus such as the state. In reality, there are relations of power, relations of power between people, between agents, where each person is in a different and dissymmetrical position. But when one says that power is a relation, that means that there are two terms, that means that the modification of one of the two terms will change the relation. That's to say that, far from constituting a kind of structure of imprisonment, power is a network of mobile, changing, modifiable and very often fragile relations. That's what I meant. So, people like Castoriadis clearly have understood absolutely nothing. All right, we won't gather up all of their objections. We'd have to stoop too low.

Sassine: Yes, well... But it was only to see how you linked things up, and thus one could say that you start with Ernst Bloch, but won't the event of Iran theoretically inflect...

Foucault: No, no, on the contrary. You could say that I believe a relation of power is a dynamic relation and indeed one that defines up to a certain point the position of the partners. But the position of the partners and the attitude of the partners, the activity of the partners, equally modifies the relation of power. Put differently, what I wanted to show is simply that there isn't power on the one hand and then the people to whom power is applied on the other, because with a hypothesis like that, either you have to admit that power is all powerful or you have to admit that it's totally powerless. In fact, that's never true. Power isn't always either all powerful or impotent. It's blind for the most part, but it sees a certain number of things all the same. Quite simply because the question is how to make sense of the strategic relations between individuals who pursue objectives, stand together, partially limit the possibility of action of the partner even as the partner escapes from them, and from all of this a new tactic emerges, etc. It is this mobility that we have to try to make sense of. And just as there are moments where there arise what you might call a phenomenon of consonance in which power is stabilised and where there really is, in sum, a subjugation, an acceptance of the mechanism of domination in a society, so too are there other moments where the consonance arises in the opposite direction, and where, on the contrary, at those moments, the entire network of power is upset.

Sassine: In history such as you describe it, there are powers — well, here I'm using the terms you use in the article in *Le Monde* — there are powers that you say are infinite but not all powerful. There are uprisings that are irreducible and there are rights that you also call universal laws.¹⁹ Can you explain the nature and foundations, be they biological, rational, economic, of these three manifestations or authorities... what could they be called? What is the concept that could group together power, right and uprising?

Foucault: I'll say this: let's take systems like our own, containing states with their apparatuses, with a whole series of techniques to be exercised in order to be able to govern people. The proliferation of power mechanisms, and consequently also the way they're stabilised through their multiplication and their refinement, guarantees that there's always, you might say, a tendency to govern too much. It's as though there's a law of excess interior to the development of power.

Sassine: That would be in the institution?

Foucault: That would be in the institution.

Sassine: Before being in desire...

Foucault: Yes, well, let's say that the institution and the desire of individuals function then as multipliers of each other. OK. And to that extent I think that one of the fundamental roles of the intellectual is precisely to assert, over and against those who govern, general limits not to be crossed. These are the guarantee of a non-excess, in any case the always provisory and always fragile guarantee that must be defended: a threatened frontier!

Sassine: But what are those rights, laws, that universal? Reason? Kant? Monotheism? Here you're adding a notion, aren't you, between the notion of power and that of uprising, the notion of rights, and you haven't explained its origins in your own point of view. What are rights? What is the universal? What is the law?

Foucault: Well, this universal I'm speaking about is, once again, the indispensable correlative to every system of power that takes hold in a given society. If there isn't a limit, well, it's universally true that you end up heading toward domination, despotism, the servitude of individuals, etc., etc. So, against this universal that

¹⁹ [Editors' note: see Foucault, "Inutile de se soulever?", 794/"Is It Useless to Revolt?", 266: "The power that a man exerts over another is always dangerous. I am not saying that power, by nature, is evil. I am saying that power by its mechanisms is infinite (which does not mean that it is all-powerful, on the contrary). The rules limiting it will never be rigorous enough. Universal principles are never strict enough to take away from it all the opportunities that it seizes. Inviolable laws and unrestricted rights must always be opposed to power."]

is a fact of power, we need to oppose another universal that will take on entirely different forms depending upon the power we're dealing with, but that will mark each time the limit that is not to be crossed.

Sassine: So this universal, it carries the mark of what it opposes, it doesn't exist in itself; it is always the product of specific cases.

Foucault: Yes, you could say that, at any rate it's not...

Sassine: I mean, is there no 'Thou shalt not kill' to give an example? But in each specific case, there are limits for the law at which it must stop. How then do we define them?

Foucault: Human rights [*les droits de l'homme*], you might say, rights in general, have a history. There are no universal rights. But it's a universal fact that there are rights. And it's universal that there must be rights. For if we don't oppose a right to the fact of government, if we don't oppose a right to the mechanisms and apparatuses of power, then they cannot but get carried away, they will never restrain themselves.

Sassine: So rights are purely negative? They restrain — they're not something positive?

Foucault: No, no, well, here I'm talking about those rights that are currently called human rights. Human rights and positive rights or laws [*le droit positif*], a system of law, for example, the legal regime of a given society — these aren't the same thing. Our systems of law in the West have tried to present themselves as logically deriving from the fundamental affirmation of human rights. In fact, that's not true. Positive law is a certain number of techniques, procedures, rules for procedures, obligations, prescriptions, prohibitions, etc. These aren't human rights. Besides, many legislators have perfectly understood what Bentham meant when he said of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, the Declaration of the French Revolution: 'But these French revolutionaries are asses, they haven't realised that from the moment where...'

[Interruption in the recording. The cassette side is changed.]

Foucault: Even a law voted by the people as a whole, from the moment that it obligates someone to something, will encroach on human rights. Indeed, a system of law, of positive laws in a society, and human rights are heterogeneous to one another. Human rights, once again, are that form of the universal that is never defined in a specific form. They're that with which one can mark out for a government its limit.

Sassine: But what are they a product of? Reason?

Foucault: Well, I'd say no, they're a product of the will.

Sassine: So, shall we move on to the notion of uprising.

Foucault: Do you want something to drink? I'm dying of thirst.

Sassine: Uh, sure, if you'd like [laughter].

[Interruption in the recording.]

Sassine: Desire then... What brings about an uprising? A decision, perhaps?

Foucault: Yes, a will.

Sassine: Could it also be a biological force?

Foucault: Have you noticed that this thing which is, how should we put it, polycultural — and you yourself know the scene over here in France well — have you noticed that this notion of the will is something that we never talk about at the present in French culture? We speak of reason, of desire.

Sassine: Yes, it's a bit abandoned as a concept.

Foucault: Yes, a bit abandoned.

Sassine: They gave us a real headache in the last year of high school,²⁰ didn't they, telling us that the will is a synthesis.

Foucault: That's right.

Sassine: Once you no longer define it as a synthesis, you...

Foucault: Well there, you know, I can't tell you much because I have a slow mind. But for a certain number of months and years even, it's seemed to me that to do the analysis of power relations appropriately requires bringing in the problem of the will. Relations of power are, of course, entirely invested by desires, by schemas of rationality, but they also put various wills into play.

²⁰ [Translator's note: *en classe terminale*. French high school students typically take at least one year of philosophy courses.]

Sassine: That is to say, a synthesis.

Foucault: No, I'd say that the will is perhaps precisely that thing which, beyond every calculation of interest and beyond the immediacy of desire, of what there is of the immediate in desire, the will is that which can say: 'I prefer to die.' There you have it. And that's the test [*épreuve*] of death.

Sassine: The highest test, or the one we constantly face? When you say, for example, 'the will to know'...?

Foucault: No, no, it's the terminal and extreme form, what shows itself in the naked state when one says: 'I prefer to die.'

Sassine: So, it's a purely irrational decision?

Foucault: No, no, not at all, it doesn't have any need to be. Nor does it need to be empty of all desire. There's a moment where, you could say, subjectivity, the subject... You could say that the will is what sets for a subject his or her own position. That's it.

Sassine: The will is what sets for a subject his or her position, his or her own position.

Foucault: The will, it's the person who says: 'I prefer to die.' The will is what says: 'I prefer to be a slave.' The will is what says: 'I want to know', etc.

Sassine: But what's the difference here between will and subjectivity?

Foucault: Oh, I'd say that, well, the will is the pure act of the subject. And the subject is what is set and determined by an act of will. In fact, the two notions are reciprocal, aren't they, for a certain number of things.

Sassine: And with that don't we fall back into the forms of idealism that your studies have dissipated [laughter]?

Foucault: Why would that be idealist?

Sassine: It a bit like the concept of man...

Foucault: [Silence] No, because...

Sassine: It's very Hegelian, isn't it?

Foucault: I'd say instead that it's Fichtean.

Sassine: I don't know Fichte well.

Foucault: You might say that what I criticised in the notion of man, and in the humanism of the 1950s and 1960s, was the use of a universal grasped as a universal notion. There would be a human nature, human needs, an essence of man, etc. And it's in the name of this universal of man that people would make revolutions, would abolish exploitation, would nationalise industry, and that they should join the Communist party, etc. This universal that allows a bunch of things and that presupposes at the same time, in a somewhat naïve way, a kind of trans-historical or sub-historical or meta-historical permanence of man. I believe that that view isn't rationally acceptable, nor is it acceptable practically. I believe that you escape from universalism when you say at last that the subject is nothing other than... the effect of a... well, than what is determined by a will. A will is the activity of the subject. Truth be told, I suppose that the person I'm approaching at full speed — and not for his humanism, but precisely for his conception of freedom — is Sartre. And Fichte. Since Sartre and Fichte... Sartre isn't Hegelian.

Sassine: When I mention Hegel, I'm thinking of the beginning of the 'Self-Consciousness' section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Foucault: Yes, that's right, indeed, he speaks of Fichte, or he's quite close to Fichte.

Sassine: And yes indeed in *Being and Nothingness*, it's a question of being for death. Well, there, the two questions intersect, no? You write: 'To be respectful when a singularity rises up and intransigent as soon as power violates the universal. when powers existing the oppose to be intellectual the of duty the Would ²¹ the uprising is in a position of weakness and to press for what you call 'respecting' the uprising when it's in a position of force? And isn't anti-strategic morality (of course, for newspaper readers, we'll have to define this word) perpetually destabilising, since it provides a support for endless uprisings without final purpose? And isn't Hegel, as you say in your inaugural lecture,²² waiting for you at the end of the road [laughter]? By positing an anti- strategic morality, aren't you in fact against power when it's strong and for the uprising when it's strong, thus...

Foucault: Did I say that? I wrote that somewhere?

²¹ [Translator's note: Michel Foucault, "Is It Useless to Revolt?", 267, translation modified (see *DE* 2, 797).]

²² [Translator's note: that is, the inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, "L'ordre du discours," published in English as "The Order of Discourse," in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert J. C. Young (1981), 48–78.]

Sassine: No, what you wrote is just: 'To be respectful when a singularity rises up and intransigent as soon as power violates the universal. 'But when there's an uprising in Iran, you support it and when Mr. Peyrefitte makes new laws, you're opposed to them,²³ but...

Foucault: I... I'm not for an uprising when it's strong, solely when it's strong, and not when it's weak. When someone shouts in the depths of a prison, I'm also on his side.

Sassine: Of course. But there you seek above all to stop the power that strikes out at him. And when there's an uprising in force, it commands your respect. Is yours definitively then a conception of something that's always destabilising, and thus strategic? If the way I've put the problem is false, you can correct it.

Foucault: In the article you're alluding to, what I tried to do wasn't necessarily to define the position of the intellectual, because, after all, I don't see why I should lay down the law for intellectuals; I've never laid down the law for anyone. Ultimately, what I was trying to do is what I had in my head. I've often been criticised for not having a politics and for not saying, for example, well, here's how prisons should function or here's how mental illness should be treated. I never say that. And I say that it's not my job to. And why isn't it my job? Well, because I think that if the intellectual is to be, as Husserl says, the functionary of the universal, it's precisely not in taking a dogmatic, prophetic or legislative position. The intellectual doesn't have to be the legislator or to make laws or to say what's going to happen. I believe that the intellectual's role is in fact to show, perpetually, how what seems to go without saying in what makes up our daily life is in fact arbitrary and fragile, and that we can always rise up. And that there are always and everywhere reasons not to accept reality as it's given and proposed to us. I don't know how a certain number of commentators and critics, more the critics than the commentators, you might say, came to the idea that for me, given that things are as they are, they can't be changed. Whereas I'm doing entirely the opposite. For example, what I say about madness: let's look at this thing that is announced to us as a scientifically established truth: the existence of mental illness, the mentally ill, their typology, etc. In fact, look a bit at what that rests on, and you'll find a whole series of social, economic, political, etc. practices that are historically situated. And consequently it's all very fragile. My project, I believe that it's one of the possible roles — if not, what good are intellectuals? — my project is in fact to multiply everywhere, indeed wherever it's possible, to multiply the occasions to rise up against the real that is given us, and to rise up, not strictly or always in the form of the Iranian uprising, with fifteen million people in the street. You can rise up or revolt [*se soulever*] against a type of family relationship, against a sexual relationship, against a form of pedagogy, against a type of information.

Sassine: It's a strategy of uprising then.

Foucault: It's a strategy of uprising. But not of global, universal, and massive uprising in the form: 'We're sick of this rotten society, let's throw it all out. 'It's a differentiated and analytical uprising that shows which elements of reality are proposed to us as self-evident, natural, obvious and necessary in a civilisation. I've tried to show how much they are actually historically recent, fragile, and so mobile, and so something we can rise up against [*soulevables*].

Sassine: And so as you've explained, this is a notion of perpetual uprising that would be definitively without any finality, any temporal end, without finality since it would be anti-strategic?

Foucault: I mean that I think that from the moment where everything that gives us occasion to rise up, everything that appears intolerable, everything that people want to change — well, from the moment where someone proposes a global and general formula such as: 'I can rid you of all that by fixing for you what you'll have to accept afterwards', I'd say the game's rigged. People must invent both what they can and will rise up against and what they'll transform their uprising into. Or what they'll direct this uprising toward. It's to be reinvented indefinitely. I really don't see any final point in this kind of history. I mean that I don't see the moment where people will no longer have to rise up. One could even predict that the forms of uprising will no longer be the same: think of those great uprisings, for example, of the peasant masses, dying of hunger in the Middle Ages, who went off to burn the fortified castles, etc. It's probable that in the Western countries, the advanced industrial countries, as people say, those kinds of revolts won't happen again. Things are different now. So, uprisings change forms, but to have to rise up... You know, when you take, for example, uprisings by homosexuals in the United States, and when you compare them to the huge uprisings that can happen in a country in the Third World where people are dying of hunger, or what might have happened in the Middle Ages, then what's happening in the United States might seem trivial. But I'd say it isn't trivial. Not

²³ [Editors' note: see Michel Foucault, "Manières de justice," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 743 (1979), 20–21, reprinted in *DE* 2, 755–759.]

because some uprisings have a marvellous value that others don't, but rather because there can't be, and we shouldn't wish there to be, societies without uprisings. There you have it.

Sassine: And now we've come back a bit to the relationship between uprising and religion. You set up a link of affinity, to use a somewhat Hegelian term that Deleuze also uses, between uprising as mode of history and religious forms. At a certain moment you speak of rising up as putting one's life in danger, and it's quite close to what can be best expressed in religious terms.

Foucault: Yes, well, I haven't grasped your question fully...

Sassine: I mean, uprisings as such, a voluntary uprising, where one risks one's life, is an uprising carried out not in order to improve living conditions, for example. Instead, it's something done in the name of an eschatology or a radical change. What relationship is there then between these two poles of religion and uprising? And is the relationship permanent?

Foucault: Oh, it's absolutely not permanent. Well, there are forms of religion and moments in the history of the relations between society and religions where religion can play that role but doesn't. Catholicism in Europe in the nineteenth century offered practically no possibilities, holds or expressions for an uprising. But on the other hand, once again, in the fifteenth century, you could say that it was an intensification of religious life, and a profound desire on the part of a certain number of individuals to get access to a form of religious life that made it upset both ecclesiastical and political institutions and their social role. Finally, it depends... Let me ask you a question off the record: is this for a newspaper or for a journal?

Sassine: Yes, it's a weekly.

Foucault: You know that we've already got 30 pages?

Sassine: Really? I didn't know...

Foucault: Yes, it's your first interview, but we've already got way too much.

Sassine: Oh really? But it's because it's interesting...

Foucault: Was there anything in the questions you asked, were there things...

[Interruption in the recording.]

Foucault: No, but you know, I think you're right, because in spite of everything, it's something that, that... I don't know... If I didn't answer, it's because, you know, sometimes I'm disarmed. I'm not a journalist. Even when I write for the newspapers, I write a bit as though I were writing a book [inaudible]. That is, I pay attention a bit to what I'm saying. I don't write at four in the morning, in fifteen minutes. Well, when I say that what I saw seemed to me to prove that the Iranians were searching for something like a political spirituality, which is something no longer familiar to us, it seems to me that the sentence is clear and that there's no arguing it. When you have to deal with people such as Claude Roy or others who manipulate the text and who say: 'Foucault aspires to a political spirituality', you're dealing with such a degree of lies, of bad faith, that you know that if you try to send a reply or a corrective, it'll be read in the same way. There will be new falsifications, etc. So I was quiet for a certain time. I let all of that settle down. And then one day, in an article, in a book, I'll sum it all up, and I'll show it's a web of lies. I don't want to enter into polemics with people whose lack of intelligence and whose bad faith are on display everywhere. That being said, maybe I was wrong, maybe it's necessary, each time someone says something silly...

Sassine: Oh, no, it's not worth it. But now there's this whole drama that began last year of the Nouvelle Philosophie, with which you were involved at the beginning, but now you're recanting...

Foucault: No, no, no, I never recanted because I was never part of it, I simply said...

Sassine: But you said somewhere that you have been more involved than you wanted to be.

Foucault: Oh no, definitely not.

Sassine: Either in *Le Nouvel Observateur* or in *L'Arc*.

Foucault: Listen, I don't think so.

Sassine: You don't want to be mixed up...

Foucault: I might have said that I didn't want to be mixed up with them, but I just wrote one thing. It was an article on Glucksmann's book, which, I believe, is important.²⁴ And especially two of his books... well at least *La cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes* seemed to me, at that moment, to be a very important book that

²⁴ Michel Foucault, "La grande colère des faits," *Le Nouvel Observateur* (1977), reprinted in *DE 2*, 277–281. The article discusses Glucksmann's *Les maîtres penseurs* (1977)/*The Master Thinkers* (1980).

wasn't getting the chance it de- served.²⁵ Well, when the second book appeared, I said to myself: OK, this time let's not pass up the book. It so happened that it had a real echo, and that I didn't need... but Glucksmann's book raised some problems for me. That's all. OK, Glucksmann was considered a Nouveau Philosophe, but he denies it. Ultimately, I don't give a damn, Glucksmann's books interest me; the other books by those who are called the Nouveaux Philosophes don't. Or so little that after going through a few, I stopped reading them. I don't give a damn. I really don't care. I feel it's not my business. So I really can't get involved. But it's true that because I'd said that Glucksmann's book was interesting for the problems of... well... oh, but all that is really toxic! Once again, either you end up policing people who write stupid things, and then you spend your whole day doing that, or you let them slide, now with the drawback that then people feel free to say absolutely anything at all. And that is one of the political and moral problems that I haven't resolved.

Sassine: Anyway, in your latest article in *Le Monde*, a good deal of problems were raised that would merit greater reflection.

Foucault: Yes. But if that's what you want, I'm never very sure of what I'm advancing, and I'd really like to be able to exchange and discuss with people who don't agree with me and who can show their disagreement and ask their questions. But from the moment you run up against people who act only like prosecutors and who denounce you as the enemy, as a sellout, as an agent of someone... What do you do? Or the people who tamper with the texts and who put you on trial with doctored files. In reality, for all these things I wrote about Iran, I really regret not having been able and not having had chances to have extended discussions with Iranians or simply with Muslims. Maybe I'm wrong, but I wish people would attribute to me exactly what I said and not anything else.

Sassine: You distinguish two types of intellectuals. On the one hand, the universal intellectual, whom you present sometimes as the heir of the Marxist vision of the proletariat and sometimes as the heir of the man of justice and of the law. And you prophesise a bit — it's somewhat complicated — the death of this type of intellectual. On the other hand, there's the specific intellectual who develops starting in 1945.²⁶ Don't the recent stands you've taken on Iran and the war in Vietnam lead you back to a representation of the universal?

Foucault: No. Well, you could say that by 'universal intellectual' and 'specific intellectual', I mean that... it seems to me, in a society like ours, at least, in the West, in Europe, that the intellectual doesn't have to distance himself from his knowledge, from, let's say, his specialty, in order to play a political role. He doesn't have to set himself up as a prophet of humanity in general. It's enough, I think, for him to look at what he does, what's happening in what he's doing. That's where we meet back up again with this conception of uprising I was just talking about. The idea that the role of the intellectual is to show how this reality that's presented to us as self-evident and taken for granted is in fact fragile. And whether it's the physicist in his laboratory, the historian of early Christianity or the sociologist who studies a society, it seems to me that all of these people can perfectly well make the points of fragility of what is self-evident, of the real, appear to us, and they can do that from what is most specialised in their specialty, the most specific in their knowledge. Well, it's true that you might ask what right I have then to talk about Iran or Vietnam. Well, I don't think I'm leaving the position of a specific intellectual when I say that I, insofar as I'm one of the governed, hold that there are a number of things that a government must not do.²⁷

Sassine: No matter the government...

Foucault: Right, no matter the government. Put differently, it's not the universal of the human being, you might say, but rather the generality of what happens in the relations between those who govern and those who are governed that allows anyone to speak about these problems.

Sassine: It's a little specious...

Foucault: It's a little specious...

Sassine: Voltaire could call himself a specific intellectual.

²⁵ André Glucksmann, *La cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes. Essai sur l'État, le marxisme et les camps de concentration* (1975), cited by Foucault in "Pouvoirs et strategies", 421.

²⁶ [Editors' note: see Michel Foucault, "La fonction politique de l'intellectuel," *Politique Hebdo* (1976), 31–33, reprinted in *DE 2*, 109–114/"The Political Function of the Intellectual," *Radical Philosophy* 17 (1977), 12–14.]

²⁷ [Editors' note: on the idea of a 'right of the governed', see Michel Foucault, "Va-t-on extraditer Klaus Croissant?" *Le Nouvel Observateur* 679 (1977), 62–63, reprinted in *DE 2*, 361–365.]

Foucault: Yes, but I really think that there, if you look at people from the eighteenth century, it was always in that way that they went about things, starting from something entirely specific. To put it differently, when I speak of the universal intellectual, I try to mark myself off from it...

Sassine: For example, is Sartre, for you, the universal intellectual?

Foucault: [Silence.]

Sassine: In fact, you're talking especially about the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. But I was thinking in particular about the period in France prior to the 1960s. You spoke of Hungary, of Poland.

Foucault: Yes, yes, we'd have to talk about that. No, but I wanted to say that I'm getting really worn out.

Sassine: I'm annoying you with my questions.

Foucault: No, no, no, you're asking a really interesting question. OK, what I meant is that the universal intellectual, if he wants to function as though he were the representative of a universal consciousness or as if he were, let's say, involved in his activity as a writer and an intellectual in a way analogous to those political parties that claim to possess both the truth of history and the dynamics of the revolution — well, if that's what you had in mind, I'd say: no, I don't want them, those intellectuals of the universal who are only the doublets of political parties. On the other hand, the intellectual who can play the role of someone who makes social stabilities fragile, makes social, historical, political and economic immobilities fragile, from the intellectual work that he does... Oh, all right, I'm sorry, but I can't do anymore!

Sassine: Final question, but a bit in the form of a challenge, but it'll be fun. I noticed that in the positions you've taken on Iran, you use the following terms: horror, drunkenness, beauty, gravity, dramaturgy, scene, theatre, Greek tragedy — you speak of the fascination of events. So, beyond technology and genealogy, beyond the political positions you've taken, would the rigorous Foucault not be an artist of the era of Francis Bacon, of Rebeyrolle and of Stanley Kubrick?

Foucault: Listen, you flatter me by saying that. I'll simply add a little detail that you already know. In fact, people always say, I don't know why, that I have the reputation of being a bit cold, dry, rigid, that I only talk about... But you shouldn't confuse the person who speaks with what he's speaking about. You shouldn't confuse what one says about something and the meaning attached to speaking about that thing. If I dismantle, if I try to dismantle mechanisms of power as carefully as possible, if I try to show how relations of power actually have a kind of logic or connection that's rather subtle, that gives them their force without taking away their fragility, that doesn't mean that I'm linked affectively or in a positive way to that kind of thing. After all, the book I wrote about madness can also come across as very lyrical, right?

Sassine: Yes, in your style, no?

Foucault: If I wrote that book on madness while trying to examine all those mechanisms, it wasn't in a climate of indifference to mad subjectivity.

Sassine: Yes.

Foucault: It's the same for crime and delinquency, etc. No, no, I don't think that this vocabulary that you've pointed out, a vocabulary that indeed is not very intellectualist, I don't think that it's something new. I don't say that as a refusal of change; I've changed. But at present there's a mode of conversion that's really constraining; you have to convert. Maybe I've converted, I've already changed a lot, but at any rate what you've picked up on doesn't seem to me to be something absolutely new.

Sassine: No, I'm not talking about novelty.

Foucault: Oh, OK!

Sassine: But just about these facts themselves.

Foucault: OK, sure then.

Sassine: An aesthetic way of approaching things.

Foucault: Yes, that's right.

Sassine: There's a side concerned with existence, it's not new... OK, thank you.

Foucault: I'm the one who should thank you.