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Michel Foucault's Concept of 'Critique' and the Iranian Experience

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Abstract

This paper offers an interpretation and discussion of the later Foucault's multifaceted concept of 'critique'. It argues that critique for Foucault is composed of three main elements: the 'spirit' (though not all of the substance) of Kant's understanding of the Enlightenment; the practice of parrhesia that emerged in Ancient Greece and became central to Christian subjectivity; and the transfigurative aesthetic experience of modernity that was most richly depicted by Baudelaire. In the second section, there is a discussion of Foucault's view of an event that continues to perplex Western observers, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, juxtaposed with a Marxist understanding of the upheaval. Rejecting both historical materialist and liberal historiography, Foucault offers a unique perspective on the Iranian Revolution, deeming it to be a practical manifestation of critique in an 'irreducibly' religious context and based on a reformation of the self situated within a wider 'political spirituality'. However, the trajectory of politics in Iran since 1979 bears resemblance to those of other, resolutely secular post-revolutionary societies, and thus raises the questions of whether Foucault ignores the universal in privileging the particular and in refusing synthesis between the West and the Orient, adopts an Orientalist epistemology.

Key Words: Critique, Foucault; Enlightenment; Parrhesia; Marxism; Political Islam; Iranian Revolution

The critical attitude

Concentrating on a short journalistic essay written by Kant in 1784 in response to a question posed by a Prussian newspaper, Foucault argues that with this article commences a new critical attitude that is characteristic of modernity (Foucault 2007:42).   What is particularly distinctive and without precedent about Kant's essay, for Foucault, is its self-consciously critical reflection on the present moment:

> [I]t is the first time that a philosopher has connected in this way, closely and from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is writing (Ibid., 104).

That is, Kant's Enlightenment essay differs from past and more familiar philosophical writing in that it relates to topical events and situates itself in relation to those events.   Understood in this way, the piece appropriately belongs in a newspaper rather than within an academic tome.   In Foucault's analysis, modernity is not properly understood as a particular historical period or indeed a doctrine, but rather as a distinctive critical ethos that has made its appearance in a variety of forms at several stages of history (Ibid., 105).[1] Foucault declares of this concept of philosophical critique:

> The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1986:112).

He attempts to reconstruct 'enlightenment' as a process rather than an endpoint. To accomplish this, it is necessary for Foucault to 'liberate' critique from the Kantian approach that he believes made all ideas and policies subject to the procedures and ultimate tribunal of Reason (Rajchman 2007: 23).   Eschewing the humanist view of Enlightenment politics as promulgating the ideals of 'liberty, equality and fraternity', which become a yardstick of the governmental arrangements of any given society, Foucault prefers to see a spirit of criticism that manifests itself as an ongoing enthusiasm for progressive measures, an "ever-renewed will to transformation" (Osbourne 1999: 50).   Humanist interpretations of

the Enlightenment are, by contrast, fundamentally nebulous in content for Foucault, for they have been subject to a multiplicity of political appropriations historically, thus "the humanist thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection" (Foucault 2007: 111). If humanism is nebulous, it is also theoretically doctrinaire for Foucault because its maxims are invariably interpreted in a de-historicised and immobile manner, but it is events that determine ideas rather than vice versa (Osbourne 1999: 50-51). Foucault's emphasis on the variegated and continuing spirit of the critical attitude would appear to strike a chord with predominant themes in postmodern thought, where difference and dynamism find their champions. But Osbourne is quick to caution against such a reading since Foucault is "more serious" than the supposedly trivial politics of postmodern thought. Rather, Foucault wants to ensure that we citizens are:

> *open to both political events and games of government in terms of their singularity rather than their inevitability – in the one case, in order to understand them properly and, in the other, as a constant reminder that government itself is an art that is never given once and for all but is subject to the forces of creative invention, accident, change and transformation (Ibid.).*

That is, Foucault's critical attitude comprises both an analytical and normative component, with the latter supervening on the former: we are to interpret in order to appreciate the contingency of governing arrangements and political orthodoxies the better to transform them. Whilst this reading is accurate, Osbourne appears to ignore the fact that postmodern treatments can, indeed, be serious engagements with politics, and that this can provide the basis for a critique of the present. Perhaps the best example of such a thinker is Rorty, who privileges an aesthetic re-creation of the self against an outdated and impoverished Enlightenment rationality. Literary art serves the political function for Rorty of safeguarding liberal values and educating citizens to avoid cruel and humiliating practices that harm others (Thacker 1993:18).[2]

Foucault has an ambivalent attitude towards the question of where his work on critique is to be situated in relation to the Enlightenment project. On the one hand, he calls into question the "simplistic" and vapid debate in 20th century continental thought between Enlightenment's liberal heirs and its detractors (such as Adorno and Horkheimer) as unedifying "blackmail" (Foucault 2007:110). And, the supposed diametrical opposition between reason and unreason on which that debate is based – and debased – is "senseless" for Foucault because reason cannot be

adequately understood in its historical and political dimensions without its opposite (Foucault 1982:210-211).   On the other hand, Foucault declares that "we still depend in large part" on the Enlightenment (Foucault in Hoy 1986:22) and are "historically determined, to a certain extent", by that event (Foucault 2007:110).   As Hoy argues, this places Foucault within the Enlightenment tradition, but since "rational autonomy is itself an empty ideal" Foucault's task becomes that of continuing the "vigour of the Enlightenment" through "permanent critique" (Hoy 1986:23).   But Habermas notices a paradox in Foucault's attitude to the Enlightenment that undercuts and threatens the unity of his project: Foucault believes that the spirit of critique should help to transform for the better undesirable governing arrangements and, yet, he also eschews a normative perspective on account of his rejection of all transcendental positions (Habermas cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1986:112).   Moreover, Habermas points out, Foucault's earlier rejection of the epistemological pretensions of modern philosophy and science (the 'will-to-knowledge' supposedly independent of power-structures) jars with his placement of his project within that same Enlightenment tradition.   Habermas asks: "How can Foucault's self-understanding as a thinker in the tradition of the Enlightenment be compatible with his unmistakable criticism of this very form of knowledge of modernity?" (Habermas in Hoy 1986:106) Against Habermas, Foucault would want to counter that objection of this sort are premised on a mistaken understanding of the nature of critique that owes its origins to an equivocation, or 'slippage', at the heart of Kantian philosophy: Kant simultaneously advocated man's subjection to the ultimate transcendental tribunal of Reason and, less prominently and rather contradictorily, the critical ethos that Foucault favours (in Owen 1999:32).   Habermas is heir of the former approach, within which the critical ethos is subordinate to and circumscribed by the rational procedures of philosophy and science and the wider political 'project' (Ibid.).   Foucault, by contrast, is engaged in the attempt to return 'enlightenment' to its essential spirit, and this involves taking "the inverse path to this movement of tipping over, to this slippage, to this way of displacing the question of *Aufklarung* onto critique" (Foucault in Ibid.)   But whether Foucault (like Rorty) can consistently refuse a normative position whilst approving certain governing arrangements over others remains a vexed question.   Moreover, Foucault may have misconstrued Habermas's reading of Kant, which amounts to a recognition that reason is limited in its applicability (particularly if its procedures claim to deliver transcendent truths about the world) whilst simultaneously affirming a transcendental role for reason as

providing the methods to reject as intellectually unviable myths and authoritarian politics (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1986:110). To Habermas's mind, modernity

> *consists in preserving the primacy of reason articulated most recently and fully in Kant's enlightenment critique while facing up to the loss of the metaphysical ground of our substantive beliefs. Maturity is the discovery of the quasi-transcendental basis of community as all we have and all we need, for philosophy, and human dignity (Ibid.).*

Foucault too sees in the critique the contours of a benchmark for political legitimacy – one that limits the power that may legitimately be extended over the citizenry: "the art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault 2007:45). This aspect of the critique has called forth the orthodoxy of "universal and indefeasible rights to which every government, whatever it may be, whether a monarch, a magistrate, and educator or a *pater familias*, will have to submit" (Ibid.: 46). However, for Foucault, as we observed above, there are no innate and inalienable 'rights' that humans qua humans possess; he shares Bentham's view that such a discourse is "nonsense upon stilts" (Bentham 2002: 317). Thus, the desire for there to be limits to state authority can only ever be *a posteriori*, as it were, and comparative:

> *I do not think that the will not to be governed at all is something that one could consider an originary aspiration. I think that, in fact, the will not to be governed is always the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price (Foucault 2007:75).*

Osbourne argues that whilst Foucault explicitly rejects the notion of natural rights throughout his career, he nonetheless in his latter works outlines the bases of resistance to government wherein Foucault is committed to the governed enjoying certain 'rights' and the governors subject to certain 'duties' (Osbourne 1999:53). The rights of the governed issue not from their 'nature' but rather are a consequence of the very fact of their being objects of a regulatory regime. Osbourne says of Foucault's position:

> *Given that we are all subject to government, and that it is the duty of governments to work for the well-being of their citizens, then we have the right to contest the evils that are done supposedly in the name of government (Ibid.).*

And, of course, this carries with it the implication of *concerted* struggle on the part of the governed to defend their 'rights'. Foucault envisions that such solidarity be global and multicultural, an ongoing and changing commitment, and in an

apparent denial of a Marxist notion of class consciousness, the solidarity ought to be 'constructivist' – that is engaged in the creation of solidarity utilising whatever tools are available in any given society or culture rather than the "organic expressions of an already-given moral solidarity of the oppressed" (Ibid.: 54) that are founded upon one's subjection to an abstract theoretical identity. As Foucault says:

There exists an international citizenship with rights and duties and which can engage with any abuse of power, whatever its author, whatever its victims. After all, we are all governed, and by the light of this, in solidarity (Foucault in Ibid.)[3]

Foucault regards Baudelaire to be a pre-eminent cultural figure of lasting significance beyond literature since he is representative of the quintessential attitude of the modern age, namely a transfigurative aesthetic experience, where the perceptions of modern citizens change markedly:

> *Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the one who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not "liberate man in his own being"; it compels him to face the task of producing himself […] This transfiguring play of freedom with reality, this ascetic elaboration of the self – Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself, or in the body politic. These can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art (Foucault 2007: 109).*

On Foucault's account, Baudelaire sees individual autonomy within modernity in the self-fashioning of one's body and existence into a work of art. The corporeal counterpoint to Kant's high-minded insistence on public reason and confinement within rational limits, Baudelaire's 'heroic' modern subject moulds his passions and body towards the transgression of these limits, and hence comprises a critical stance towards the present, and thus societal and political norms.

To the objections that a critical approach can scarcely be said to have come into being with Kant or Baudelaire in the modern period, when intellectuals, dissidents and others have engaged in criticism stretching far back into history, and that critique has no positive value since it is merely a tool of a higher value, Foucault answers that a proper analysis of the distinctiveness of modern critique must issue from an understanding of the subjectivity that gave rise to it. For Foucault, this requires a genealogical investigation into the distant past:

> *Even if the Enlightenment has been a very important phase in our history, and in the development of political technology, I think we*

have to refer to much more remote processes if we want to
understand how we have been trapped in our own history (Foucault
1979: 226).

Foucault rejects as untenable another feature of Kant's philosophy: the pre-given Kantian self. In its stead, Foucault continues in the anti-transcendental tradition of Nietzsche, who rejected the notion of a fixed human essence.[4] Human subjectivity is constructed by and through historical practices, Foucault believes: "the subject is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not mostly nor ever identical to itself" (Foucault in Han (2006:3). In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault demonstrates how even the concept of the human body, often believed to be a fundamental component of personal identity, is actually subject to pliability by means of various official practices (Foucault 1977).   In Foucault's nominalist historiography, everything has been constructed and genealogical study is a tool to uncover this often concealed past:

> *[T]his critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce*
> *from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to*
> *know; but it will separate out from the contingency that has made us*
> *what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking*
> *what we are, do, or think (Foucault in Owen 1999).*

Indeed, genealogy is for Foucault critique *par excellence* since it demonstrates through destabilising orthodoxies that that which we take to be settled and static is flexible and reversible (Owen 1999:36).

On Foucault's view, modern subjectivity and its critical attitude emanate from a distinctively Christian heritage of pastoral practice. Sharply diverging from the conventional liberal historiographical account of modernity that postulates a radical dichotomy between traditional religious culture and the advent of the age of reason, Foucault's genealogical analysis into subjectivity reveals for him the insight that the effects of originally religious practices and attitudes continue to inform the social structures and governmentality of 'secular' modernity.[5]   Foucault argues that Christianity uniquely developed the idea that every individual was to be governed by a priest in order to realise his or her salvation within a "detailed relationship of obedience" (Foucault (2007:43)).   Such a subordinate relationship was the context within which the believer would be expected to publicly disclose his or her sins to the priest, to testify against themselves, and this information had to be 'true' as far as the believer could tell (Ibid.:171).   This led to Christianity emerging as a

discourse preoccupied with the truth which enjoins upon believers an obligation of truth, wherein they must disclose their selves (Ibid.:171). Foucault explains:

> *Christianity is not only a salvation religion, it's a confessional religion […] Each person has the duty to know who he is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognise temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself (Foucault in Carrette 2000: 27).*

As suggested towards the end of the above quote, Foucault distinguishes between two distinctive varieties of confession and disclosure: one public, the other to be practised away from the community and in isolation with the priest. With respect to the private variety of confession, which Foucault terms *exagoreusis,* this evolves in the modern era into the disciplinary practices that seek to control individuals; the schoolteacher and the psychiatrist are modern proxies of the clergyman (Afary and Anderson 2005:52). The former kind Foucault terms *exomologesis*; it normally occurs in the presence of others and often involves self-punishment and the maceration of the body as a penance (Foucault 2007:187). But, whether the performance of the penance is to be communal or private, silent or loquacious, the ultimate purpose is very similar, if not synonymous: to disclose the truth about oneself through the paradoxical renunciation of the self.   As Foucault says:

> *[T]he revelation of the truth about oneself cannot be dissociated from the obligation to renounce oneself. We have to sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about ourselves, and we have to discover the truth about ourselves in order to sacrifice ourself. Truth and sacrifice, the truth about ourselves and the sacrifice of ourselves, are deeply and closely connected (Ibid.).*

That is, Christian pastoral practices fashion a self and a wider 'truth' by renouncing the self. Foucault connects the public confession of sin to a wider practice of the fearless proclamation of a message, which he terms, following Euripides, as *parrhesia.* The origins of the practice of parrhesia lie in Fifth Century BC Greece.   The practitioner of parrhesia is unabashed in communicating that which he believes in:

> *The one who uses parrhesia […] is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind*

completely to other people through his discourse. In parrhesia, the
speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he
has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what
the speaker thinks (Foucault 1983).

Though it arose in Athens, parrhesia was incorporated by Christianity into its confessional practices. Foucault, however, distinguishes some of the elements of Hellenic parrhesia from its Ecclesiastical version. The renunciation of the self and the world was the ultimate Christian purpose, whereas parrhesia was seen by the Greeks as vehicle for "self-possession and self-sovereignty" in the context of their ethics of the care of the self (Ibid.). However, a necessary feature of parrhesia that continued into the Christian era was the element of risk-taking involved: parrhesia always concerns telling the truth to a higher authority than oneself (Ibid.). For the early Christian apostles, struggling to spread the gospel against ruthless Roman opposition, parrhesia became the bold announcement and proselytising of the New Testament (McSweeney 2005:128). For Foucault, it is this political function of parrhesia that amounts to its distinctive critique factor:

Parrhesia is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards
oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in
a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor.   The
parrhesiastes is always less powerful than the one with whom he or
she speaks (Foucault 1983: 4).

One may observe here a resemblance between Foucault's parrhesia and the notion of 'performative utterances' developed by the analytical philosopher John Austin. Austin argues that sentences expressed orally or in the written form which are performative utterances do not describe something and are, thus, not to be assessed in terms of their truth value.   Rather, performative utterances are themselves the very performances to which they supposedly merely refer (Austin 1962:6). Han elaborates further on the epistemological framework that underpins Foucault's parrhesia, and that is profoundly different from that of the modern era (Han 2005:11).   For the parrhesiastes, truth is to be understood not as the adequation of a proposition with reality, as it is in the Correspondence Theory of Truth, but rather as a function of his or her ethos in society. Foucault says of the parrhesiastes:

What guarantees that I am saying the truth to you is that I am
effectively as subject of my behaviour, absolutely, integrally and

> *wholly identical to the subject of speech that I am, when I say what I*
> *say to you (Foucault in Ibid.:11).*

That is, for Foucault there is an identity of the confessor's belief and the truth that is established by his or her integrity. To the inevitable question of whether we can be sure that a particular confessor is accurately communicating his or her sins (he or she could be mistaken or misleading us, for example) Foucault answers that it is the parrhesiastes's courage which validates their testimony (Foucault 1983). To the objection that this is inadequate or irrelevant to the truth-value of a statement, Foucault will answer that modern epistemology and modern modes of subjectivity raise for us problems that were absent in pre-Cartesian societies (Han 2005:14). In order to both return to an older conception of truth and challenge oppressive governing arrangements; Foucault advocates an ethical transformation of the self:

> *An ethics of the self [...] is an urgent, fundamental, politically*
> *indispensable task [...] it is true after all that there is no more*
> *primary and ultimate point of resistance to political power than in the*
> *relationship with the self (Foucault in Ibid.:17).*

And, elsewhere, in a rebuttal of Marxist theories of resistance which focus on liberation through overthrowing the state, Foucault expands upon this point:

> *[T]he political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is*
> *not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's*
> *institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and the type of*
> *individualisation which is linked to the state. We have to promote new*
> *forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality*
> *which has been imposed on us for several centuries (Foucault, 1982:*
> *216).*

To an objection that Foucault's wide-ranging and expansive conception of power (where power relations must exist perpetually) amounts to little more than conservative preservation of the *status quo*, Foucault would make the following points:

> *[T]o say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not*
> *to say either that those which are established are necessary, or, in*
> *any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies,*
> *such that it cannot be undermined. Instead, I would say that the*
> *analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations*
> *and the "agonism" between power relations and the intransitivity of*

freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence (Ibid.:223).

That government of many and various kinds will always exist is not an argument, in Foucault's mind, for the maintenance of any particular appearance of it. This is to be achieved through 'technologies of the self' – practices by virtue of which one can fashion one's own subjectivity. As we saw above, Foucault deems there to be the possibility of solidarity between the governed for change. One particular manifestation of resistance in the modern world to oppressive power structures which Foucault rather presciently identified, and which is connected to his account of Christian pastoral practices, was that of religious identity politics, and it is to that that we now turn our attention.

Recognising Critique in action: Foucault in Iran

Carrette argues that Foucault sought to identify in his own time a "mysticism of revolt" within which a new conception of spiritual subjectivity in a religious framework could be fashioned (Carrette in McSweeney 2005:133). Consistent with his view of the Enlightenment, Foucault saw theology in terms of practice rather than scripture or doctrine (Ibid.). Having previously witnessed at first hand both the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland to the Communist government, which would later influence the Solidarnosc organisation, and the nascent Liberation Theology movement in Latin America (Bernauer 2006), Foucault made several visits to Iran in 1978 and 1979, which was then in the grip of social disquiet and popular agitation against the oppressive regime of the Shah. The turmoil would culminate in a popular revolution. Foucault wrote many journalistic articles for French and Italian newspapers during his visits, in a manner and spirit that recalls Kant's essay in a German newspaper on the contemporaneous event of the Enlightenment. As Osbourne puts it:

> *Reading Foucault's contributions to philosophical journalism, one gets the impression, precisely, of somebody trying to think through the circumstances of the present moment by moment and with the aid of whatever resources – philosophical, sociological, historical, economic – lay to hand (Osbourne 1999:55).*

That is, Foucault refused to submit what he was witnessing in Iran to ready-made philosophical theories that, for him, simply could not adequately account for the dynamics of that which was occurring. Despite his self-confessed lack of

knowledge of Iranian history and culture, Foucault nevertheless attempted to enact the spirit of critique in his despatches from Tehran:

> *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 (Foucault in McCall 2008).*

What was distinctive about the Iranian Revolution, and which perplexed many European observers of both a liberal and a Marxist persuasion, was the fact that many of the revolutionary leaders were deeply religious Shi'ite Muslims and many of the popular slogans were couched in the language of Islamic theology. Shi'ism was not the means by which fundamental class interests were mediated, as a Marxist analysis might have it, rather, for Foucault, the revolt was irreducibly religious, bringing to the Iranians "the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity" (Foucault in Carrette 2000:137). Though the European struggle for modernity has been anti-clerical in nature, Foucault believed that the Iranian Revolution was a radical rejection of secular modernity, represented by the Shah's policies (McCall 2008:8). It, thus, failed to fit the theoretical models of liberal social progress and Marxist revolution developed in the European history of ideas[6]. Iran manifested for Foucault a phenomenon long forgotten in the West, that of a 'political spirituality':

> *How can one analyse the connection between ways of distinguishing true and false and ways of governing oneself and others? The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself though a different way of dividing up true and false – this is what I would call 'political spirituality' (Foucault in Carrette 2000:137).*

The singular political spirituality of Iran's revolution was unexpected for Western observers because they had, like Habermas or Kant, failed to recognise that critique is an ethos rather than a doctrine to which we must submit events to scrutiny. The apparently doctrinaire machinery of Marxism comes in for particular criticism from Foucault, as he finds himself concurring with religious Iranians who saw Marxism as a Western ideology unable to account for events that were unfolding:

Do you know the phrase which is most mocked by Iranians
nowadays? The phrase which seems to them the most ridiculous, the
most senseless, the most Western? 'Religion is the opium of the
people.' Up to the present dynasty, the mullahs preached in their
mosques with a rifle by their side (Foucault in Almond 2004).

Marx's famous dictum is, thus, revealed to be inadequate to explain the
irreducibly religious nature of the revolt, with religious consciousness inculcating a
political militancy, rather than as the intellectual father of modern socialism had it
with his belief that confessional faith has a purely soporific effect. Foucault's view
is that religion can both fashion a particular form of obedience to authority that was
demonstrated in Christian pastoral practices and continued into the disciplinary
forms of governmentality of secular Western societies, as well as providing a means
to criticise and reject existing governing arrangements (McCall 2008: 4). The latter
Foucault believed he had witnessed in Iran, with the frank and fearless speech of the
oppositionalists against the Pahlavi regime. Foucault observed in Shi'ite public
ceremonies during the month of Muharram in Iran fundamental similarities with
earlier Christian confessional practices, where believers disclose their 'truth' in the
presence of others. As Afary and Anderson write:

In Muharram, self-adulation, self-mutilation, and the "baring of the
flesh and the body" are not individual, lonely acts of repentance.
Rather, they take place as part of a collective, dramatic public
festival [...] The individual is therefore involved in an act of public
confession (Afary and Anderson 2005:53).

Foucault's understanding of events in Iran is at odds with a Marxist analysis.
Firstly, Marxists may want to take issue with Foucault's claim that the revolution
amounted to a rejection of modernity, since the Shah's autocratic rule was
something that bears greater resemblance to despotic feudal European polities,
rather than conceptions of society developed during the Enlightenment. Foucault's
belief that Marx's theories had demonstrated their epistemological and explanatory
limitations on Iranian soil faces the objection that Foucault ignores classical Marxist
accounts of religion. A longer quotation of the sentences preceding the popular
slogan that Foucault quotes from Marx's Introduction to his *A Contribution to the*
Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right reveals that Marx did not ascribe to religion
a merely soporific effect:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real
suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of

> *the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people (Marx 1844).*

That is, Marx explicitly recognises a role for religion in opposing political and economic oppression, even if he did not consider religious politics to be an adequately progressive force.   The Marxist writer Harman has provided an historical materialist account of the Iranian Revolution in which he denies Foucault's claim that it was 'irreducibly' Shi'ite in orientation; rather, organised religion was only tangentially associated with it.   Arguing that the victory of Islamism in that revolution was not "inevitable", and referring to the particular and highly contingent dynamics at play, Harman states that the experience of Iran in 1979:

> *merely confirms that, in the absence of independent working-class leadership, revolutionary upheaval can give way to more than one form of the restabilisation of bourgeois rule under a repressive, authoritarian, one party state (Harman 1994).*

And, the key to making sense of how the revolution became 'theocratic' lies not in some religious or Islamic 'spirit' but rather in material forces that also shape Western societies.   Thus, "the vacuum created by the failure of the socialist organisations to give leadership to an inexperienced but very combative working class" (Ibid.) led to an orientation and outcome that was not secular and not socialist. Therefore, perhaps Foucault was too eager to jettison 'Western' theoretical models to explain contemporary political events when some of those theories are best placed to understand these events.   The new subjectivity of a 'political spirituality' that Foucault apparently saw in the Iranian people did not lead to the establishment of a regime that was emancipatory in all respects.   Rather, the way in which a tyrannical state apparatus became instituted in Iran in the 1980s demonstrates that the country followed a political trajectory similar to that of other post-revolutionary societies in the world that also became authoritarian.   But these other post-revolutionary societies were secular in orientation (and in many cases avowedly anti-religious) – suggesting that an analysis that identifies a supposedly distinctive 'political spirituality' is unable to account for the palpable similarities between what occurred in Iran and in other societies.   Such correspondences can be seen as having been occluded through Foucault's adoption of a rather Orientalist framework in his treatment of Iran, with Iran functioning as the site of resurrection of Europe's lost past, paralleling Said's view that such knowledge delineates a clear ontological and epistemological antithesis between the West and Oriental Other,

with the former dominant over the latter and without the possibility of synthesis (Said 1978).

The executions and abuses that followed the establishment of the revolutionary government drew Foucault's ire; he wrote protesting the excesses in an open letter to the new Iranian Prime Minister Bazarganto in April 1979 (Bernauer 2006: 782). Though his pleas fell on deaf ears, Foucault was never to regret his support for the upheaval in Iran, later commenting:

> *The spirituality of those who were going to their deaths [during the Revolution] has no similarity whatsoever with the bloody government of a fundamentalist clergy (in Afary and Anderson 2005: 265).*

Concluding Remarks

Foucault has emerged as a thinker who takes seriously the critical vigour of the Enlightenment and locates his own project of critique within that intellectual history. Rejecting secular liberal historiography, he identifies the role of confessional discourses in the formation of subjectivity in the modern era – both in terms of their 'liberatory' critical dimensions and their oppressive and disciplinary governmentality. Foucault's analysis of the Iranian Revolution proposes that classical Western political thought derived from the Enlightenment cannot properly account for modern attempts to fashion a new subjectivity in opposition to predominant and tyrannical discourses and practices. Crucially, for Foucault, a 'critical' revolt against any given order must be based on a transformation of human subjectivity and, thus, the self.

Note

1. On this point, Foucault is concurring with Nietzsche that the singular rationality of the Enlightenment does not represent a qualitatively novel phenomenon: rather, this spirit has come to the fore during other periods of Western history, most notably, for Nietzsche, with the rise of Socratism in ancient Athens .

2.   See Rorty 1989. Whether Rorty (or likeminded postmodernists) can reconcile the normative demand to citizens to refrain from cruelty with the radical rejection of moral truth is another matter .

3.   Whyte argues that Foucault at this stage became increasing sympathetic to the emerging climate of human rights discourse and practice through NGOs, including Medecins Sans Frontières and Amnesty International, which had gained prominence contemporaneously with the decline of the revolutionary idea in French intellectual life and society (Whyte 2012: 217). Problematically, such human rights discourse was located within neoliberal rationality, which was just beginning to become the dominant economic model in most Western states (as Foucault himself presciently predicted), as well as ultimately providing the overriding ideological justification for subsequent military interventions in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Ibid., 221).

4.   See Nietzsche, e.g., Beyond Good and Evil 2010:227

5.   We can observe here that Foucault is indebted to an important theme in later Nietzsche, who regarded modern attitudes and ideologies to be the often unconscious residue of a 'Christian-moral' interpretation of the world.

6.   Here Foucault echoes the views of the pre-eminent ideologue of the Iranian Revolution, Ali Shariati, who rejected the idea that organised religion was inherently opposed to social progress. Shariati accuses Marx of equating the Messiah with the Pope, and in the process airbrushing generations of martyrs who opposed Roman imperialism and feudal rule: "Could Marx actually not know that independent Christian thinkers, in struggling against the church and the clergy have made greater sacrifices, to greater effect, than materialists and Marxists?" (Shariati 1980: 38).

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