Focusing on “What is Happening Right Now”:

Understanding Michel Foucault’s Writings On the Iranian Revolution Through Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Action

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Abstract

Michel Foucault visited Iran in 1978 in the midst of the popular uprisings that ultimately toppled the Shah's monarchic regime and led to the foundation of the Islamic Republic. His writings and interviews on the Iranian Revolution indicate his astonishment with the movement. He was particularly awed by the surprising unity of the movement and the role that Shia Islam played in bringing hundreds of thousands of people together. His writings, however, received a lot of immediate criticism, especially after Khomeini founded a fundamentalist Islamic government in the aftermath of the revolution. Foucault was asked to admit to his "mistake". But he refused to reevaluate his observations on the Iranian revolutionary movement in hindsight. In his writings, he explicitly stated that he aimed at grasping what was "happening right now," indifferent to the past or the future of the movement. The purpose of this thesis project is to analyze Foucault's understanding of the Iranian movement through a close reading and analysis of his writings on the movement. In doing so, this thesis draws on Hannah Arendt's theory of action to argue that Foucault witnessed the actualization of human freedom in Iran. Furthermore, this thesis hopes to, in Foucault's defense, show the value in attempting to grasp a new phenomenon as it occurs, placing emphasis on the process, as opposed to the aftermath, of a movement.

Image 1: Bloody Hands[1]

Image 2: Anti-Shah Demonstrations[2]

Image 3: Women Protesters[3]

[1] David Burnett, *Bloody Hands*, Digital image, *pNr.org*, National Geographic, 22 Sept. 2009. Web. 25 Apr. 2013.

[2] ---. *Anti-Shah Demonstrations*, Digital image. *ContactPressImages*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Apr. 2013.

[3] ---. Women Protesters. Digital image. *Npr.org*. National Geographic, 22 Sept. 2009. Web. 25 Apr. 2013.

These movements are religious because they are political, and political because they are religious.[4]

Introduction

The above quotation comes from a dialogue between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, a noted Iranian writer, when Foucault first visited Iran in September 1978. Foucault returned to Iran for a second time in the November of the same year amid the popular resistance movement against the Shah's regime. His writings on Iran appeared in Italian and French newspapers.[5] He found himself "at the birth of ideas" in Iran. Iran had particular significance for Foucault's thought regarding the future of philosophy. In an interview in 1978 he asserted the need to "construct another political thought, another political imagination, and teach anew the vision of future."[6] He proclaims that this must be "born outside of Europe or equally born in consequence of meeting and impact between Europe and non-Europe."[7] He noticed that Iranians strived for a different way of thinking, "one that takes nothing from Western philosophy, from its juridical and revolutionary foundation. In other words, they try to present an alternative based on Islamic teachings."[8] Foucault is interested in understanding this alternative political thought that is based on Islamic teachings, which warrants his initial proclivity to conceive of the religious and political characters of the movement as intertwined. His subsequent writings on Iran, however, show a more nuanced understanding of the role that Shia Islam plays in the Iranian movement. It

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[4] Michel Foucault, "Dialogue Between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 187.

[5] Foucault's writings on Iran were published in the following newspapers: *Corriere della sera*, *Le Monde, and Le Nouvel Observateur*.

[6] Foucault, "Dialogue," 185.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 186.

is possible that Foucault witnessed something special in Iran that transformed his thought forever.

Yet Foucault's writings on Iran have received very little philosophical merit. Although one may distinguish their journalistic nature from his philosophical writings, it would be irresponsible to dismiss their importance outright. Even then, they have been dismissed largely for another reason: Foucault's alleged support for the Islamic movement, which some consider as his "mistake" while others deem it as a proof that his "enthusiasm for oppositional movements led him to applaud uncritically dictatorial regimes."[9] Of the fifteen articles and interviews, only three were translated into English before 2005, when they were all translated and published in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and Seductions of Islam*.

Acknowledging this lack of interest in his writings on Iran, Foucault inquires: "What is it about what happened in Iran that a whole lot of people, on the left and on the right, find something irritating?"[10] In contrast to the "untroubled sympathy" that the situations in Portugal or Nicaragua enticed, Foucault "soon felt a small, epidermic reaction that was not one of immediate sympathy."[11] Puzzled by this uneasy reaction, Foucault suggests that perhaps it stems from the unfamiliarity and novelty of the Iranian movement: "We recognize a revolution when we can observe two dynamics: contradictions in that society, that of class struggle or of social confrontations and the presence of a vanguard, or political ideology. When it comes to Iran, we

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[9] Michiel Leezenberg, "Power and Political Spirituality: Michel Foucault on the Islamic Revolution in Iran." *Michel Foucault and Theology.* Ed. James Burner and Jeremy Carrette, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004) 105.

[10] Michel Foucault, "Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 250.

[11] Ibid.

cannot recognize the two elements that make up a revolution."[12] Therefore, the inability to discern familiar elements of a revolution in Iran would account for this unsympathetic reception of the events in Iran.

In contrast to this "whole lot of people," this very novelty of the movement galvanized Foucault's interest in Iran: "It is not a revolution, not in the literal sense of the term, not a way of standing up and straightening things out. It is the insurrection of men with bare hands who want to lift the fearful weight … of the entire world order that bears down … on them."[13] Revolution in the conventional sense of "standing up and straightening things out" presumes an inherent rationale for the change. In fact, "straightening things out" implies that the structure of the system itself is fine but only requires some cleaning up. In contrast, the Iranian movement was "perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane." By contrasting "straightening out" to the "insanity" of the Iranian movement, Foucault accentuates the novelty of the movement insofar as it does not conform to the Western conceptions of revolutions and their rationality.

My project in this thesis is two fold: to examine the nature of this novelty and to analyze the role of Shia Islam in the movement, as accounted by Foucault. Put simply, what in the movement, why, and how did it astonish Foucault? In the next section, I recapitulate arguments put forth by Foucault's critics and apologists while demonstrating their misreading of Foucault. In the section that follows, I summarize Foucault's writings on Iran, distinguishing between the attributes that awed him and his conceptualization of Shia Islam as the condition for the

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[12] Ibid., 251.

[13] Michel Foucault," The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 222.

possibility of the movement. I then briefly argue that Foucault's theories on power and knowledge are deficient in providing an explanation for Foucault's observations in Iran. After delineating Hannah Arendt's theory of action, I argue that Foucault witnessed the manifestation of the actualization of human freedom in Iran. By juxtaposing Foucault's writings on Iran and Arendt's theory of action, I argue that (1) he was awed by Shia Islam as a *medium* through which a political force was generated, and that (2) he was preoccupied with the ongoing process, as opposed to the aftermath, of the movement. This latter point, I claim, demonstrates Foucault's experience of the movement from the participants' perspective, which further reinforced his amazement with the movement, and explains why he was "mistaken."

Mistaken Critics?

Atoussa, a pseudonym for an Iranian woman, vocalized her criticism in November, shortly after Foucault's first few pieces were published:

> Living in France, I am profoundly upset by … Michel Foucault [who] seems moved by the "Muslim spirituality" that would advantageously replace … the ferocious capitalist dictatorship that is tottering today. [...] Saudi Arabia drinks from the wellspring of Islam. Hands and heads fall, for thieves and lovers. Many Iranians are like me, distressed and desperate about the thought of an Islamic government. We know what it is. Everywhere outside Iran, Islam serves as a cover for feudal or pseudo-revolutionary oppression.[14]

[14] Atoussa H., "An Iranian Woman Writes," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 209-210.

She wrongly presumes that Foucault is supportive of the Islamic government, a presumption that Foucault challenges in his response to her.[15] Moreover, although one should take this criticism seriously, since it comes from an Iranian, it is important to take into account that she lives in France. Also, the criticism asserts that this Islamic government, a potential product of the revolution, would definitely be oppressive. In response, Foucault accuses her of "merging together all the aspects, all the forms, and all the potentialities of Islam within a single expression of contempt."[16] He emphasizes that the "problem of Islam as a political force is an essential one for our time and the coming years. In order to approach it with a minimum of intelligence, the first condition is not to begin by bringing in hatred."[17] Thus, Foucault objects to Atoussa's dismissal of Islam in its entirety. Per Foucault's assertion, Islam has, indeed, become central to the politics of all Muslim countries in the recent decades.

By March 1979, despite the diversity of the movement, the Islamists emerged on top. Anyone who was accused of being anti-Islamic was imprisoned, executed, or otherwise silenced. The Islamic fundamentalism that most outsiders were afraid of had become reality. In a parody-like piece, Claudie and Jacques Broyelle ridiculed Foucault's seeming support for the Islamic movement: "This spirituality that disciplines and punishes allowed the people of Iran to rise up."[18] By associating Foucault's concepts of discipline and punish with his views on Iran, they seem to belittle Foucault's observations regarding the novel nature of the movement in Iran.

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[15] Michel Foucault, "Foucault's Response to Atoussa H.," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 210

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, "What Are the Philosophers Dreaming About? Was Michel Foucault Mistaken About the Iranian Revolution?" *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 248.

Implicitly referring to Foucault, they call upon "the philosopher" to "say today "long live the Islamic government" and it would be clear that they are going to the final extreme of their radicalism," or to say, "no I did not want that, I was mistaken. Here is what was wrong with my reasoning; Here is where my thinking is in error."[19] Foucault's response to this article was a non-response.[20]

Maxime Rodinson, too, challenges Foucault's writings, though in kinder words: "A very great thinker, Michel Foucault, placed excessive hopes in the Iranian Revolution." He focuses on Foucault's limited knowledge of Shia Islam and Khomeini's political ambitions. Although Foucault did, in fact, lack extensive knowledge of Shia Islam, only few experts were aware of Khomeini's political endeavors. Moreover, Rodinson disregards Foucault's basic observations in Iran: "The protest against an unfavorable situation is always seeking a source of ideological legitimation. Religions, philosophies, sects, schools, parties, and even vague, barely conscious tendencies can all serve to attain this objective." Foucault's fascination with the Iranian movement stemmed from its novelty, in the *absence* of parties, or any other classifiable elements. Indeed, he explicitly renounces the idea of the role of Shia Islam as an ideology or a source of legitimacy.

While agreeing with Rodinson that Foucault misunderstood Shia Islam, Michiel Leezenberg applauds his astuteness in recognizing the rising importance of political Islam. However, he contends that regardless of these "forgivable mistakes," "perhaps the main shortcoming of these reportages is that they overemphasize the religious dimension of the

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[19] Ibid., 249.

[20] He basically stated that he would not take a polemical position.

demonstrations, at the expense of their unmistakably nationalist element."[21] Although the demonstrations definitely exhibited nationalist elements, Leezenberg also fails to grasp Foucault's understanding of the role of Shia Islam in the movement. As I will demonstrate in the next section, Shia Islam was not merely a "dimension" of the movement. Rather, it was the condition for the very possibility of it. In fact, the nationalist groups joined the movement, replacing their nationalistic slogan for the Islamic ones. This does not mean that the nationalists abandoned their nationalistic ideology or goals. Rather, it means that Shia Islam, as a medium, transformed the specific grievances and aspirations of the nationalists, who then became incorporated in the movement.

Joining the criticism bandwagon, Corey McCall says, "It is true that Foucault was wrong–profoundly wrong, in fact–about the significance of events in Iran. It might even be that he is guilty of glorifying the revolution through his interpretation of the revolution as an expression of political spirituality."[22] Admitting that it is only in hindsight that one can determine the flawed nature of Foucault's writings in Iran, McCall commends Foucault for trying "to come to terms with a difficult political situation without attempting to explain it away."[23] Foucault's writings were, indeed, preoccupied with observing and understanding the present as he experienced it. As Bonnie Honig notes, Foucault "was called upon more than once to renounce his views, especially after the declaration of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But he refused. Foucault absolutely insisted on maintaining fidelity to the events he witnessed and refused to re-

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[21] Michiel Leezenberg, "Foucault," 104.

[22] Corey McCall, "Foucault, Iran, and the Question of Religious Revolt." *International Studies in Philosophy* 40.1 (2008): 98.

[23] Ibid.

assess them in light of their outcome."[24] In May 1979, Foucault asserted his refusal to reassess his previous observations and writings on Iran in light of Khomeini's founding of the Islamic Republic:

> The spirituality of those who were going to their deaths has no similarity whatsoever with the bloody government of a fundamentalist clergy. The Iranian clerics want to authenticate their regime through the significations that the uprising had. It is no different to discredit the fact of the uprising on the grounds that there is today a government of mullahs.[25]

At the very least, therefore, these writings deserve to receive philosophical merit insofar as they demonstrate an attempt at grasping what was taking place in Iran during the movement, untainted by the awareness that the movement came to an end when another dictatorial regime seized power. What philosophical value can we attribute to these writings, which give prominence to concurrently observing and apprehending the movement as it unfolded? In other words, why would Foucault refuse to revisit and undermine his observations about the movement while nonetheless acknowledging the brutal aftermath? In order to answer these questions, a thorough analysis of Foucault's observations in Iran is in order.

Foucault on Iran

The content of Foucault's writings on Iran can be divided into two categories: the attributes of the movement and the condition for the possibility of the movement. I group Foucault's discussion of the surprising unity of the movement, its unified popular will, and the

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[24] Bonnie Honig, "What Foucault Saw at the Revolution: On the Use and Abuse of Theology for Politics." *Political Theory* 36.2 (2008): 310.

[25] Michel Foucault, "Is it Useless to Revolt?" *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, (2004) 265.

amazing courage demonstrated by the people, as the attributes of the movement. I then explicate his conceptualization of Shia Islam as the condition for the possibility of the movement.

Foucault repeatedly articulates his amazement with the unity of the movement. "[The movement] spreads in an oddly effective manner, from the leaflets to the sermons, through shopkeepers, workers, clerics, teachers and students."[26] Not only does he notice the "oddly effective manner" of the movement's expansion, but he also recognizes its remarkable unity:

> The revolt spread without splits or internal conflicts. The reopening of the universities could have put into the forefront the students, who are more westernized and more Marxist than the mullahs from the countryside. The liberation of over a thousand political prisoners could have created a conflict between old and new oppositionists. But none of this happened.[27]

The possibility of new tangible spaces for political activity, such as universities, could have resulted in a competition between these new centers and the mosques, but it did not. The political prisoners, whose political views ranged from nationalists to communists to liberalists, too, joined the movement while simultaneously maintaining its unity.

This unified yet diverse opposition movement astonished Foucault, who acknowledges that "the collective will is a political myth with which jurists and philosophers try to analyze or justify institutions. It's a theoretical tool: nobody has ever seen the "collective will" and, personally, I thought that the collective will was like God, like the soul, something one would

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[26] Foucault, "Mythical Leader," 221.

[27] Michel Foucault, "A Revolt with Bare Hands," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 211.

never encounter. But we met, in Tehran and throughout Iran, the collective will of a people."[28] Foucault sees in Iran something that he once considered a myth, a philosophical tool. Iran exemplified a real instance of the collective will, and it astonished Foucault:

> It constitutes a perfectly unified collective will. It is surprising to see this immense country demonstrating an extraordinary unity in spite of all this. It is the same protest, it is the same will that is expressed by a doctor from Tehran and a provincial mullah, by an oil worker, by a postal employee, and a female student wearing the chador. This will includes something rather disconcerting. It is always based on the same thing, a sole and very precise thing, the departure of the shah. But for the Iranian people, this unique things means everything.[29]

Because of this unified collective will, Foucault considers the Iranian movement as "singular," one that has no counterpart in human history. "For the moment, however, no party, no man, and no political ideology can boast that it represents this movement. Nor can anyone claim to be at its head. This movement has no counterpart and no expression in the political order."[30] More specifically, the unity of the Iranian movement stands in sharp contrast of other movements of his time. "In twentieth century, in order to overthrow a regime … arms, a military command, organization, preparation and so forth are necessary. What is happening in Iran is enough to worry today's observers. In it they recognize not China, not Cuba, and not Vietnam, but rather a tidal wave without a military leadership, without a vanguard, without a party."[31] What was

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[28] Foucault, "Spriti," 253.

[29] Foucault, "Mythical Leader," 221.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Foucault, "Bare Hands," 211.

happening in Iran had no counterpart in history, and Foucault recognized its novelty.[32] It differed strikingly from the revolutions inspired by Marx, where the conflict was between classes. The absence of a vanguard or a party also indicated the absence of an ideology that would have *prescribed* a definite alternative solution for Iranians.

The absence of a discernible party or ideology, however, did not signify a lack of general direction. Foucault recognizes two features of the Iranian movement:

> There is a refusal to sustain in any manner the current system, to allow its apparatus, its administration, or its economy to function. But there is also a refusal to step aside in favor or a political battle over a future constitution, over social issues, over foreign policy, or over the replacement of officials. To be sure, these issues are discussed, but in such a way that these questions cannot give rise to political manipulation by anyone. All of these spines, the Iranian people, transform themselves into a hedgehog. The Iranian people's political will is to prevent politics from gaining a foothold.[33]

These two features of the movement, its adamant refusal of the existing system as well as its cognizance to abstain from planning the aftermath allowed for its unity. "The absence of long-term objectives is not an indication of weakness. On the contrary, because there is no plan for a government and because the slogans are simple, there can be a clear, obstinate, almost unanimous popular will."[34] It is important to note that the lack of a definite plan for the government did not hinder considering alternative possibilities for the future. In other words,

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[32] Image 2, on page 5, illustrates the Iranian people together protesting the Shah's regime. The unity that Foucault witnessed in Iran can be seen in this photo.

[33] Ibid., 212.

[34] Ibid.

people came together and debated the possibilities as opposed to settle for a predetermined platform. Furthermore, this unanimous popular will has also made it difficult for politicians to emerge. "It is a law of history that the simpler the people's will, the more complex the job of the politicians. Politics breathes well only where this will is multiple, hesitant, confused, and obscure even to itself."[35] This conception of politics corresponds to Foucault's amazement with the novelty of the Iranian movement, since it did not consist of parties, vanguards, etc. which marked the political scene elsewhere in the world.

In addition to the collective will of the movement, Foucault was amazed by the people's manifestation of courage. Prior to the outbreak of the movement, Iranians were afraid of the regime's secret police, known as SAVAK. Even during the movement, Iranians living abroad expressed this fear, as Foucault notes: "I knew some Iranians in Paris, and what struck me about a lot of them was their fear. Fear that it would be known that they were consorting with left-wing people, fear that agents of SAVAK might learn that they were reading this or that book, and so on." But something about the movement annihilated this fear:

> When I arrived in Iran, immediately after the September massacres, I said to myself that I was going to find a terrorized city, because there had been four thousand dead. Now I can't say that I found happy people, but there was an absence of fear and an intensity of courage, or rather, the intensity that people were capable of when danger, though still not removed, had already been transcended.[36]

Two significant points may be drawn from this set of quotations: (1) Foucault perceived a notable difference in one's fearfulness depending on being inside or outside of Iran, and (2) his

[35] Ibid., 213.

[36] Foucault, "Spirit," 257.

use of the word "courage" as well as the people's capability to "transcend" danger suggests an *active* confidence in *overcoming* human limitations, such as fear of death.

Foucault further notices that this courage has simultaneously intensified the strength of the movement:

> The regime is one of the best armed in the world, with a police force that is among the most powerful on earth. They have done so with bare hands, without resorting to armed struggle, with a determination and a courage that are in the process of immobilizing the army, which, little by little, freezes and hesitates to fire on them. Two months ago, the army killed three to four thousand in Djaleh Square. Yesterday, two hundred thousand people marched in front of soldiers, who did not react.[37]

The people's amazing courage not only strengthens the movement itself, but it also paralyzes the army that has orders to shoot at the people. There is something powerful about the manifestation of this courage that astounds and subsequently incapacitates the fifth largest army in the world. And the people manifest this courage with "bare hands." The juxtaposition of the potency of "bare hands" with the capitulation of the regime's strong army illuminates the irreducibility of a people who rise together to demand a new way of life.[38] Moreover, the soldiers' voluntary non-reaction suggests that this irreducible phenomenon of a courageous people pervades all humans, including the army that is supposed to annihilate the movement. This manifestation of courage coupled with "the uprising of a whole society has choked off the possibility of a civil war."[39] The

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[37] Foucault, "Bare Hands," 211. This is yet another novel feature of the Iranian movement, especially considering the current wave of unrest and civil war in Syria and the broader Middle East.

[38] Image 1, on page 5, exemplifies the power that these "bare hands" had in captivating anyone, from the person whose blood is witnessed on the photographed man's hands to the photographer that captured the significance of the moment.

[39] Ibid.

courage permeates the entirety of the society, expanding the size of the movement while maintaining its unity.

Foucault's discussion of Shia Islam implies its role as the condition for the possibility of the movement. With regard to the leadership and organization of Shia Islam, Foucault notices two features. First, the mosques and other places of worship are not strictly for religious purposes. Foucault notices that community-building and local politics takes place in these spaces. In the case of an earthquake, for example, the mosque functioned as the local government, collecting resources to relieve those who are affected while also planning to rebuild the community.[40] Moreover, "religious structures not only [act] as centers of resistance, but also as sources for political creation."[41] The popular uprising used these places of worship as spaces for mobilization and discussion. The importance of mosques lies in that they are tangible, real places that allow for gatherings and political discussions, especially since the Shah had banned any open spaces for political activities.

Second, he observes that among the clergy, some sort of an established hierarchy does not determine religious authority.[42] The clergy, who asked the people to protest, were "not enthroned," but rather were "*listened to.*"[43] If the people do not listen to them, in other words, they would not have any other source to derive their religious authority. Moreover, the clergy are independent from one another. Therefore, the religious leaders play a non-dominating role. They

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[40] Michel Foucault, "The Army: When the Earth Quakes," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 190.

[41] Michel Foucault, "What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?" *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 207.

[42] Michel Foucault, "Tehran: Faith against the Shah," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 202.

[43] Ibid.

guide, but do not dictate. Moreover, although many clergymen played a vital role in mobilizing the masses at the local level, Ayatollah Khomeini was widely acknowledged as the spiritual leader of the entire movement. Foucault is amazed by "the love that everyone individually feels for him."[44] This "love" for Khomeini is all the more surprising to Foucault because people ranging from extremely religious to non-religious expressed it.[45]

In an attempt to explain the appeal of Khomeini, Foucault accentuates that as the point of connection, he is "outside of the country, outside of the political organization, outside of all possible negotiations."[46] In addition to be outside of the country due to exile, therefore physically inaccessible, Khomeini vowed to not return until the Shah left Iran. Foucault attributes two other characteristics to Khomeini in explaining his role as "the point of connection": "Khomeini says nothing, nothing other than no, to the shah, to the regime, to dependency. Finally, Khomeini is not a politician. There will not be a Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government. Khomeini is the focal point of a collective will. […] It is not only a spontaneous uprising that lacks political organization, but also movement that wants to disengage itself from both external domination and internal politics."[47] Therefore, the spontaneity of the movement as well as its active dissociation from anything that would impede its unity, amaze Foucault. Khomeini is a point of connection in the movement because he is an insider insofar as he symbolizes the movement's tenacious refusal to accept the existing system and way of life. His physical

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[44] Michel Foucault, "The Revolt in Iran Spreads on Cassette Tapes," *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 218.

[45] Image 3, on page 5, is a good example of women, with different religious orientations, coming together in a movement under the spiritual guidance of Khomeini.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Foucault, "Mythical Leader," 222.

absence, too, further intensifies his role as a symbol.[48] Foucault, however, does not expand on the importance of this physical absence. Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979. He *did* enter politics. He *did* found a party. He *did* found a government. This mischaracterization of Khomeini aroused much of the criticism Foucault encountered. Although Khomeini had introduced his theory of *Velayat-e-Faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurist) a decade earlier, only a few experts were aware of it. The majority of Iranians, in fact, perceived Khomeini as outside of politics, strictly a spiritual leader.

If Khomeini as a spiritual leader symbolized the movement's fortitude in opposing the existing system and way of life, Shia Islam was the condition for the very possibility of the expression as well as comprehension of this fortitude by being the *medium* through which people's various grievances and aspirations were *transformed* into a political force:

> So what role has religion, then, with the formidable grip that it has on people, the position that it has always held in relation to political power, its content, which makes it a religion of combat and sacrifice, and so on? Not that of an ideology, which would help to mask contradictions or form a sort of sacred union between a great many divergent interests. It really has been the vocabulary, the ceremonial, the timeless drama into which one could fit the historical drama of a people that pitted its very existence against that of its sovereign.[49]

Elsewhere, he says: "The Shia clergy is not a revolutionary force. This does not mean that it [Shia Islam] constitutes an ideology that is so widespread among the people that true revolutionaries are forced for a time to join it. It is more than a simple vocabulary through which

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[48] It would be interesting to compare the symbolic aspect of Khomeini with the role of myth of origin that plays a foundational role in any community.

[49] Foucault, "Spirit," 252.

aspirations, unable to find other words, must pass."[50] In this quotation, Foucault clearly rejects the idea that the mullahs are "revolutionary," which I interpret to mean as those actively seeking a revolution. He also denounces the notion that appealing to Shia Islam is a short cut, a compromise, or a lowest common denominator. Instead, he provides a different conceptualization of Shia Islam, as one that "transforms thousands of forms of discontent, hatred, misery, and despairs into a force."[51]

Foucault's conceptualization of Shia Islam as that which *transforms* forms of discontent into a force differs from the view that proclaims Shia Islam as inherently revolutionary itself. In other words, Shia Islam is neither the primary cause for the movement nor its political force. Rather, it acts as an intermediary passage, a medium, through which forms of discontent and despairs are transformed and generate a political force. Therefore, the task at hand is to decipher how it generates a political force by a process of transforming individuals' grievances. Foucault describes this medium as "a form of expression, a mode of social relations, a supple and widely accepted elemental organization, a way of being together, a way of speaking and listening, something that allows one to be listened to by others, and to yearn for something with them at the same time as they yearn for it."[52] One may wonder, therefore, how this way of being together, of speaking and listening, differs from the everyday instances of communication among individuals. More importantly, how and why does this form of expression, mode of being, way of speaking and listening, transform individuals' grievances and aspirations into a political force? The following visual representation illustrates the role of Shia Islam as a medium.

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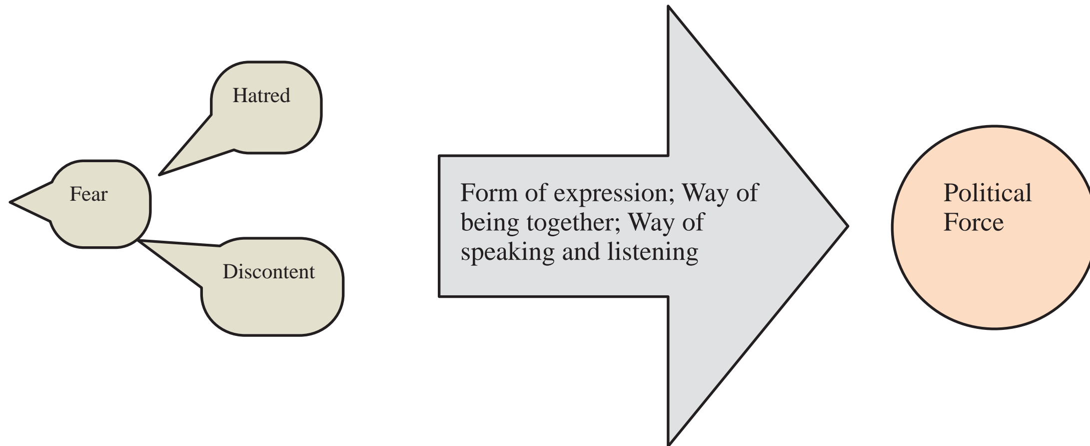
[50] Foucault, "Faith," 202.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 202-203.



Foucault via Foucault

To understand Foucault's observations in Iran, I first turn to his own theories on power and discursive regimes. As mentioned earlier, his writings on Iran received little attention from scholars partially because these writings differ from his other works. For one thing, Foucault's plethora of work mainly takes a genealogical approach to understand the nature of power in the modern society. He conceptualizes power as a net-like thing, one that enables individuals to be individuals, and only exists insofar as individuals interact with one another. Therefore, Foucault's concept of power explains his observations in Iran only to the extent that the collectivity of people was powerful and testified to the validity of his general conceptualization of power. However, although the collective movement was an instance of power, it is not satisfactory to stop at that.

One cannot understand Foucault's writings on the Iranian movement by appealing to his concept of sovereign power, which refers to the power that is concerned with property and wealth. Under the sovereign power framework, the sovereign has power and is thus visible while the masses are powerless and thus invisible. Although Iran arguably was under this framework of sovereign power to begin with, the fact that the formerly invisible masses became visible and

powerful testifies to the deficiencies of a theory of sovereign power in explaining Foucault's observations in Iran. If anything, the Iranian revolution displays a transition from sovereign power, but Foucault's account does not provide a theory to understand this transition either.

Foucault's account on disciplinary powers, too, proves deficient in explaining his observations in Iran. For one, disciplinary forces discipline individuals while also putting them in a hierarchy with respect to one another. Foucault noticed exactly the opposite of a hierarchy, of a system of domination, in the people who filled the streets in opposition to the Shah. For another, Foucault explicitly states that disciplinary powers impede the ability of individuals to resist the forces collectively:

> [Discipline] arrests or regulates movements; it dissipates compact groups of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it must neutralize the effects of counter-power that spring from them and which form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions–anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions.[53]

Under a disciplinary framework of power, popular uprisings are unlikely to occur. Therefore, not only does the disciplinary power framework fail to explain Foucault's observations in Iran, but also it actually confirms that Iranians did not function under a disciplinary framework. Therefore, Foucault's theory on disciplinary powers does not provide a theoretical framework through which we could expound his writings on Iran.

Foucault's account on the relationship between power and truth, and discursive regimes, better provides a framework through which his observations in Iran can be understood. At the

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[53] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 219.

most fundamental level, he says, "we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth."[54]The causal relationship between the production of truth and the exercise of power suggests that any production of truth already accompanies power, which cannot be exercised otherwise.

> Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own regimes of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and fall statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.[55]

In other words, by truth, Foucault is referring to a discursive regime that operates at a meta-level in a society, setting the system of rules that dictate what counts as valid and what gets marginalized as invalid.

Shia Islam would qualify as a discursive regime as it sets the rules that determine falsity and truth. For example, instead of abiding by the tradition of Western Enlightenment, which centralizes reason, Shia Islam certifies validity of a statement by appealing to the Quran or the tradition of the prophet. Therefore, an instance of individual reasoning holds no merit as long as it does not receive validity from the Shia system. Therefore, one could argue that Foucault's

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[54] Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) 93.

[55] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) 131.

observations in Iran were mere proofs for his theory regarding the relationship between power and truth production.

The relationship between Shia Islam as a discursive regime and the people who exercised power through producing its system of truth-production affirms Foucault's theory on the relationship between truth and power. But one could go a step further in explaining Foucault's reaction to the developments in Iran by appealing to his account on subjugated knoweldges, which are those local knowledges that are marginalized and discredited by the accepted discursive regime. He claims that "it is … through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work."[56]

Since the Shah's attempts at intensive modernization aimed at marginalizing and undermining Islam and the clergy in the Iranian society, it is safe to suppose that Shia Islam was a subjugated knowledge prior to the opposition movement in 1978. According to Foucault, only through the re-appearance of these subjugated knowledges can a criticism take place. Without these local knowledges, the discursive regimes maintain their dominance and continue marginalizing voices that they invalidate. But once these voices gain the momentum to challenge the discursive regimes, they have managed to perform criticism, which would expose the system of domination inherent in the discursive regimes. Therefore, one could argue that Foucault observed a real example of re-appearance of a subjugated knowledge, which is valuable insofar as it challenges the mainstream discourse. Although I think that this interpretation is somewhat correct, it still lacks the theoretical framework to explain why and how Shia Islam transformed

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[56] Foucault, "Two Lectures," 82.

many grievances into a force. In fact, the very process (for the lack of a better word) of this reappearance of the subjugated knowledges remains a puzzle in Foucault's work.

Hannah Arendt on Political Freedom

Hannah Arendt's theory of action as laid out in the *Human Condition*[57] may provide the theoretical framework through which one could interpret Foucault's writings on Iran. Action, as she conceptualizes it, refers to activities involve human interaction with other individuals, mainly speaking and doing things that are for the sake of themselves.[58] Action is directed at other humans, as opposed to *things*, which is the case in labor and work (even a doctor is dealing with a thing insofar as he is treating a *what*, a patient, an ill person). Action corresponds to the human condition of plurality, that *men*, not one man, live together and inhabit the earth.[59] It is through action, via speech and deed, that "we insert ourselves into the human world."[60]

> In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is–his qualities, talents, shortcomings, which he may display or hide–is implicit in everything somebody says or does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity.[61]

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[57] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 7.

[58] Arendt identifies three modes of activity for the vita activa: labor, work, and action. Labor refers to activities that sustain the body and biological life, such as eating. Work refers to activities that aim at bringing some durability to human lives as well as facilitate labor, such as building a house. For a detailed breakdown of their differences, see *The Human Condition.*

[59] Ibid., 7.

[60] Ibid., 177.

[61] Ibid., 178.

Speech and deed "are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. … A life without speech and without action is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men."[62] Arendt conceptualizes the world as the realm of human interaction, and thus depends on individuals' speech and deed to exist. Moreover, individuals who do not disclose the *who* that they are cease to exist in the world, since they fail to insert themselves in the world.

More specifically, this disclosure of the *who* is significant because it allows individuals to realize their equality while also distinguishing themselves. "If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood."[63] Without speaking and acting among other people, individuals would not live a full human life because they have not been able to express their individual uniqueness to others while recognizing the ultimate equality of all unique individuals.

By equality, Arendt is referring to the equality of all men once they enter the political realm. "The *polis* was distinguished from the household in that it knew only "equals," whereas the household was the center of strictest inequality. To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled."[64] Men are equal insofar as they all have been able to transcend beyond the necessities of life, which belong to the private sphere. By entering the public sphere,

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[62] Ibid., 176.

[63] Ibid., 175.

[64] Ibid., 32.

individuals are equal insofar as they have distanced themselves from the inherent hierarchy in the private sphere. "To be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed."[65] This definition of equality suggests that in action, there is no hierarchy and only when individuals act without ruling others or being ruled by others are they engaged in action.

In action, humans experience and actualize their potential for human freedom. This is because as individuals, they stand against one another as *whos*, and not whats. "To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin, to set something into motion. It is not a beginning of something, but of somebody, who is a beginner himself."[66] Thus, in acting, individuals disclose themselves, which inevitably begins something new–another addition to the web of human relations. It is important to keep in mind that although action is about beginning something new, it does not aim for a particular end. In other words, action starts something new but the product of action is unpredictable. It is an ongoing activity among various individuals, and its product only manifests itself after the individuals' death to a historian looking back at their doings. Since action belongs to the human realm, and humans' interactions with one another, it is the condition for the possibility of the human world and is durable so long as other humans, i.e. in history books, family stories, etc, remember it.

The mere existence of a group of people does not constitute the plurality that is necessary for action. Therefore, plurality is the condition for action but it also requires having the space of appearances, where the many individuals appear to one another. Only then can they appear to one another as individuals and interact with one another as individuals. The significance of

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[65] Ibid., 33.

[66] Ibid., 177.

appearing to one another as individuals lies in that they would disclose the *who* that they are to one another. Appearing to others is only half the battle, however. Individuals disclose themselves to one another, but they also have to be comprehended by another individual, another *who*. Therefore, action necessitates two simultaneous processes: appearing to others as well as comprehending others as *whos*. Any activity that may be among people but does not fulfill these two conditions would not be considered as action, and therefore not an actualization of human freedom.

Arendt's theory of action is implicit in her accounts on the revolutionary spirit with respect to the American Revolution and the French Revolution. She notes that each time revolutions appeared, "they sprang up as the spontaneous organs of the people, not only outside of all revolutionary parties but entirely unexpected by them and their leaders."[67] This characteristic of revolutions, their spontaneity, follows from her theory of action–as something unpredictable. She would claim that revolutionary parties that aim at a "revolution" do not actually engage in action because they have an end they pursue. Their activities are a means to an intended end, which does not meet the criteria for action.

Arendt's account on revolutions pertains to the Iranian movement in two interrelated ways. It highlights the necessary role that the mosques played in providing "tangible spaces for freedom."[68] She argues that the American Revolution happened because the people had the public space to engage in politics and enjoy public happiness as well as public freedom. In fact, she claims that the public space was *constituted* and organized during the course of the

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[67] Hannah Arendt, "The Revolutionary Spirit and Its Lost Treasure," *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. Ed. Peter Baehr, (London: Penguin, 2000) 512.

[68] Ibid., 516.

revolution itself. The constitution of a public space during the course of a revolution points to a second aspect of revolutions. Arendt refers to the phenomenon as a "revolutionary spirit," one that mobilizes a people *spontaneously*. This "revolutionary spirit" is the spirit of beginning something new, which does not have a particular objective and is therefore unpredictable. It is at the intersection of the public space and the revolutionary spirit that people actualize their political freedom. One, they do so in the presence of others. Two, this doing is spontaneous and responsive to the developments of a movement based on human interactions. Therefore, insofar as revolutions create a space of appearances as well as engage individuals in spontaneous ways, they are instances of actualization of political freedom.

Arendt makes a distinction between revolutions fueled by political grievances versus those that mobilize a people out of despair. She argues that the American Revolution was a true instance of human actualization of political freedom because it sprang from a desire to engage in one's political life. On the other hand, the French Revolution mobilized people because of despair. The French came together out of hunger and demanded reform to address issues of labor and work. The Americans demanded reform in the realm of action, realm of politics.

Thus far, I have demonstrated that Arendt's account of action as the manifestation of political freedom and briefly provided her views on revolutions specifically. Yet, these accounts do not specifically elucidate the significance of this actualization of human freedom. To say that it distinguishes the human life from other animals does not satisfy those who want a positive account of the significance of this freedom. I argue that Arendt's specification that humans appear to one another as individuals, *whos*, explicates the significance of human freedom.

Although individuals interact with one another for the sake of interacting with one

another, a “product” of this interaction is that individuals realize the differences of perspectives among them. In fact, Arendt asserts that action is special and rare because “being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.”[69] Therefore, the fact that individuals see and hear each other from different positions and perspectives gives action its significance. Moreover, if everyone was in the same position or everyone had a perspective that absolutely negated other perspectives, then there would be no freedom.[70] These two points are interrelated. Being able to see and hear others while being in a different position implies that the individual *can* comprehend others despite being in a different position. Given that individuals have to be in different positions, how *can* they comprehend one another? This may seem like a slight distinction, but it refers to something very essential and hardly explicit in Arendt’s thought. Being able to see and hear other individuals while being in a different position implies the presence of some underlying commonality among individuals when they appear to one another. I argue that her discussion of what makes action free reveals, albeit implicitly, what this commonality may be.

Arendt asserts that actions are free insofar as they spring from principles: “Action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will–although it needs both for the execution of any particular goal–but springs from something altogether different which I shall call a principle.”[71] By principle, Arendt does not mean an ideal or a universal imperative, such as justice. Rather, she means “principles” as Montesquieu

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[69] Hannah Arendt, “The Public and the Private Realm,” *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. Ed. Peter Baehr, (London: Penguin, 2000) 204.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Hannah Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. Ed. Peter Baehr, (London: Penguin, 2000) 445.

conceptualizes in *Spirit of the Laws*. In this sense, principles are shared, public, and collective passions or emotions that inspire action in different ways.[72]

The principle of an act manifests itself only as long as the act lasts, not before nor after. "In distinction from its goal, the principle of an action can be repeated time and again, it is inexhaustible, and in distinction from its motive, the validity of a principle is universal, it is not bound to any particular person or to any particular group."[73] She identifies the following as principles that their manifestation would allow for the actualization of or lack thereof of political freedom: honor or glory, love of equality, or distinction or excellence, fear or distrust or hatred. Therefore, when an action is inspired by a passion for honor or love of equality, which differs from the action's motive and goal, that action manifests the actualization of political freedom.

Since a politically free act necessarily springs from a principle, which by definition is a shared and public passion or emotion, then one may resolve the earlier problem that we encountered on how individuals could be from different positions and yet see and comprehend one another from those different positions. A politically free act manifests the principle from which it has sprung, which therefore allows others to understand the act as well as the actor from different positions because they share a collective passion. In instances when people speak to one another from different positions but their speech and deed lacks the principle, and therefore the shared element, others may not comprehend the act and the actor, which would make the act unfree. This is because Arendt is concerned with the actualization of political freedom and an action that is not public, insofar as those perceiving it do not understand it, does not actualize the human potential for freedom.

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[72] Stephen Salkever. Bryn Mawr College.

[73] Arendt, "Freedom," 445.

Foucault via Arendt

In this section, I argue that Arendt's theory of action allows us to understand Foucault's observations in Iran–both the astonishing attributes of the movements as well as the role of Shia Islam as a medium through which grievances and aspirations were transformed into a political force. The following conditions have to be met for something to be considered as action, and therefore an actualization of human freedom: individuals (i) disclosing *who* they are as well as comprehending other *who*s (through speech and deed) and (ii) setting into motion something new, without having a particular goal in mind. Individuals enter the public space from different perspectives while simultaneously have the ability to comprehend another *who* that stands in a different position. Since to be different and yet have the ability to comprehend other perspectives requires some commonality, I argued that Arendt's notion of the principles serves as that commonality. Moreover, through interacting with one another, they set into motion something new, a process that is spontaneous and unpredictable. Therefore no individual knows about and has control over the outcome of the process. These conditions facilitate our understanding of Foucault's observations in Iran.

Foucault's observation regarding the participation of the clergy, students, oil workers, shopkeepers, communists, and nationalists, demonstrates the presence of many *who*s that came from different perspectives. Foucault was astonished that these various groups of people were able to come together and expand the strength of the movement. He was further amazed that the addition of other groups, such as the recently freed political prisoners, did not undermine the unity of the movement. They simply joined the movement and added to its overall strength. Arendt's notion of equality, too, explains the unity despite diversity of the movement as well as

the absence of any parties, vanguards, or discernible hierarchy. These different Iranian individuals entered the public space, disclosing the distinct *who* that they are. Transcending their biological lives, they appeared as equals to one another, since they all demanded a better political life. This ability to transcend one's life, the private realm, marks their equality in the public realm. It also explains their surprising and sudden courage. In the public realm, they no longer cared about the survival of the individual biological life. Rather, they were concerned with the distinctly human world, where they lived together and constituted a political realm that embodied their purely human interactions.

Arendt's theory, however, does not account for Khomeini's role as the spiritual leader. Although no one would deny the fundamental importance of Khomeini, it is difficult to articulate exactly how he affected the movement. This difficulty stems from the fact that people, regardless of their religiousness or lack thereof, found something inspiring in Khomeini. He was a spiritual leader, and just as one cannot define "spiritual," one cannot define Khomeini's role either. We can only provide a negative definition of "spiritual"–that it is not rational. We can describe it as something powerful. But, unless we experience it (and the "it" may vary for individuals), we cannot understand it.[74] Foucault deems Khomeini's role as irreducible to any component parts, which further complicates the task of understanding the nature of his influence in the movement. But perhaps, similar to the myth of origin, Khomeini allowed for foundation of the community that was the movement. His "spiritual leadership" may have been real or exaggerated, we will never know because we weren't there. Nonetheless, he exemplified the unity of the movement as its point of connection. An example may help elucidate this point: I do not know about the

[74] This is similar to defining, describing, and experiencing "love".

original honor code at Haverford. But every year, a new class of students enters the community, hears about the honor code and others' experiences with it, and leaves Haverford with a distinct understanding and experience of the code. And yet, every time I meet a Haverford alumni, we instantly bond over the honor code. We suddenly feel part of the same community. The experience may be different from the founding fathers of the honor code, yet the spirit of the community, however different it may look, lives on.[75] This is how I understand Khomeini's role, which Foucault labels as the "mythical leader".

Furthermore, the movement emerged spontaneously, outside of any preexisting political parties, surprising everyone inside and outside of Iran. This spontaneity is consistent with Arendt's conceptualization of action as unpredictable and her account of revolutions as spontaneous. The movement's lack of any long-term political objectives, too, corresponds to the absence of a particular end in Arendt's notion of action. The presence of a short-term political goal, however, impedes the applicability of Arendt's theory to the Iranian case. In fact, Foucault considered the presence of a single objective as the reason for the movement's unified collective will. Arendt does not distinguish between short-term and long-term goals, which complicates the applicability of her theory in interpreting real situations. Her account on revolutions, particularly the American revolution, however, may resolve this problem. All revolutions spontaneously rise to negate an existing condition, while demanding something new. Iranians denounced the Shah, but did not specify what they wanted in its place. Insofar as the objective aims to negate, remove, or transcend a preexisting condition, therefore, one could argue that the movement is still open-ended and still consistent with Arendt's theory of action.

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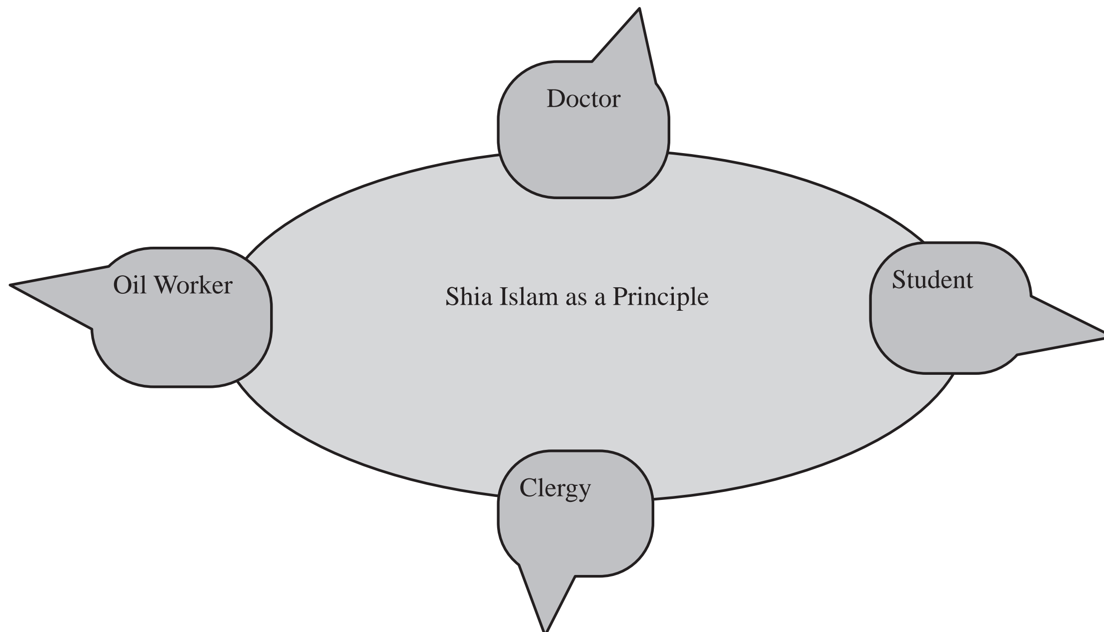
[75] We now have women as well as students of color at Haverford. The founders of the original honor code would not have envisioned me as a potential member of the community. Yet, as a member of this community, I feel represented by the code and interpret it according to my imagined as well as experienced views of the Haverford community.

Moreover, the Iranians who joined the movement did so for political reasons. They demanded political participation. Foucault recognizes this feature of the Iranian resistance movement. He recognizes that the Iranian people do not live in poverty and hunger. The people's motive to participate in the demonstrations is primarily political. Insofar as the motives for the demonstrations were political participation, they were instances of action. The people acted.

Thus far, I have demonstrated that Arendt's theory of action explains Foucault's observations regarding the surprising unity of the movement as well as the astonishing courageousness of the people. Most importantly, I argue that Arendt's notion of the principles as shared public passions, elucidates the role of Shia Islam as a medium. Foucault conceptualized Shia Islam as a mode of being, a way of speaking and listening, a form of expression, that transformed thousands of forms of discontent, hatred, misery, etc., into a political force. Although different individuals and groups of people came together to express their discontent with the Shah's regime for varying reasons, they were able to express themselves in a way that was apprehensible by others. By expressing their grievances and aspirations through the language and ceremonies of Shia Islam, which stress the irreducibility of resisting oppression, they were able to come together in a way that was not possible otherwise. This is importance because individuals' grievances varied from one another. For instance, students aspired to live a politically active life whereas the clergy opposed the regime's attempts at modernization.

Through a narration of the Battle of Karbala, where the third Imam and his family resisted and were subsequently slaughtered by Yazid, the specific and distinct grievances and aspiration were transformed into a larger struggle between a dictatorship and a people that decided to no longer obey. Karbala's narrative emphasized the irreducible power of sacrificing

one's life for the just cause, which inspired the masses to courageously say no to the regime, stand in front of the fifth largest army in the world, and demand to be heard. Karbala's story, the martyrdom of the Imam for refusing to obey an oppressor, and the collective passion for justice enabled the masses to rise together despite their differences. Foucault's conceptualization of Shia Islam as a medium that transformed people's discontent into a political force corresponds to Arendt's notion of the principles from which action springs. Shia Islam was not the goal of the movement. Neither was it the cause of the movement. The people had grievances to begin with. But it was the principle that was the condition for the possibility of the movement. It allowed individuals to come together to disclose who they were to one another while also recognizing their inherent equality when present in the public space. The following visual representation illustrates an interpretation of Shia Islam as a principle in Arendtian terms, which enabled various individuals to come together and understand one another despite their fundamental differences.



The importance and irreducibility of this experience of the shared passion is implicit in Foucault's writings. He suggests to draw a distinction between the totality of the processes of transformation before and after the revolution ended and the specificity of the revolutionary event. "That's to say, the specificity of what people experienced deep inside, but also what they experienced in that sort of theater that they put up together from day to day and which constituted a revolution."[76] Those outside of Iran, away from the revolution, could rationalize the movement in religious, political, social, or economical terms, but they did not experience the totality of the movement. They were the audience, while those participating in the revolution were on the stage, performing as one does in a theater production. They embraced their being and involvement in the movement. They experienced the coming together, the unity of differences, and the transformation of different voices into an apprehensible force. They experienced them because they were the elements that constituted the entirety of that movement.

Foucault's interpretation of the "Islamic government" highlights this very experiencing of the revolutionary event as becoming the very aim of the movement. First, he claims that this "Islamic government" is a form of government that would place traditional structures of the Islamic society, such as the mosques, at the center of an active political life. In other words, the conditions that allowed for popular uprising in the first place would then become permanent elements of the people's political life. Secondly, this form of government would embody something that Foucault calls "political spirituality." Foucault is unclear as to what this "political spirituality" actually entails, but he speculates that it is the very thing that the people were experiencing as they were its active agents. It is a form of government that differs from the

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[76] Foucault, "Spirit," 252.

Western system, which relies on realpolitik and *raison d'etre* of politics. He labelled the movements as the most insane, which places it in direct opposition to the rational system of the West. The movement was incomprehensible because it lacked the discernible features of a revolution. Interestingly, this very irreducibility, insanity, and incomprehensibility, made it powerful and "spiritual." Foucault notices something powerful in this spirituality and insanity, but recognizes that he is perhaps the only one: "I can already hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong."[77]

The irreducibility of the movement into components further intensified the novelty of the experience itself. Foucault says, "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."[78]This juxtaposition of "history" with "future" and "foreseeing" with "past" is disorienting. In a way, this rhetorical technique signals a sense of interchangeability of the functions of recalling and foreseeing. In another sense, it implies the inaccessibility of the past and the future, as foreseeing the past and writing the history of the future are both literally impossible. In any case, Foucault draws attention to the present, "to what is happening right now" in Iran. In doing so, one is neither recalling a past that has already happened nor predicting a future that still has to come. Rather, one engages with and observes the present for the sake of the present. The future, however indefinite it may be, is the *outcome* of this present, not its *goal*. It was this present, this unfolding of events in Iran, the uprising of a whole people in becoming active participants in their political life, that astonished Foucault. And Shia Islam was the condition for the possibility of this

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[77] Foucault, "Dream," 209.

[78] Foucault, "Mythical Leader," 220.

movement because it transformed the differences into a unified political force, one that enabled the people to speak and listen to one another, be the actors in their own theater, and experience an irreducible actualization of their human freedom.

Conclusion

On April 22, 2013, two bombs killed three and injured more than 170 individuals at the Boston Marathon. For the next three days, the entire nation came together with one single goal in mind: bring those responsible for the bombings to justice. The manhunt that ensued kept everyone who followed the event on the edge. Republicans, democrats, students, parents, law enforcement agents, Muslims, atheists, all wanted the suspect to be captured and be brought to justice. It was a moment of solidarity for the whole nation. It did not matter if you were from the north or the south. It did not matter if you hated running. It did not matter if you despised the country's tendencies in racially profiling its dark-skinned male population. All that mattered was that innocent human lives were taken and such acts of violence were absolutely unacceptable. Once the suspect was caught, however, the nation recoiled to its many divisions across political, social, ethnic lines. Some wanted him to be tried as an enemy combatant, while others debated whether he should receive the death penalty. The debate on immigration was reinvigorated as the Chechen origin but naturalized status of the suspect complicated his identity. The point is, one cannot reduce the experience of the event as it happens to its ending. Something distinct, irreducible, and indescribable was experienced by the nation as the search for those responsible for the bombings went on.

Foucault, too, experienced something novel and irreducible in Iran. He tried to grasp what was going on right then, as the women and men courageously stood in front of the machine

guns to voice their distinctly human grievances and aspirations. Those who dismiss his writings as "mistaken," because Khomeini did enter politics and a reign of terror followed, miss the very thing that Foucault was trying to do: to focus on what was happening right then.

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