


Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 163–69

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Revolution Making a Break in History

CITE AS:

Arianna Sforzini, 'Revolution: Making a Break in History', in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 163–69 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-15_20>

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this essay is to provide an analysis of Foucault's use of the notion of revolution in the reports he wrote for *Il Corriere della Sera* during his two trips to Iran in September and November 1978. Foucault critically frames the historical and philosophical concept of revolution, in order to oppose it to the spreading revolts against the Shah, which embody the simple and negative opening of the possibility of a transformation in history. Yet it is possible to reactivate the notion of revolution in a non-restrictive sense in order to think about the role and the possibility of political revolts and freedom today?

Revolution

Making a Break in History

ARIANNA SFORZINI

‘Revolution’ is a central concept in Western contemporary philosophy. Since Kant, and then Hegel and Marx, the term revolution has taken on a double meaning: (1) the embodiment of freedom in history, the sign of the openness of historical times, the ability to change, following the free practical human nature, and to progress towards the better; (2) the achievement of history itself — for example, a proletarian revolution in Marxist thought, which will accomplish the destruction of the old world and create the new communist era. Revolution is a capital turning point in the history of humanity, realizing human freedom and pushing it to its limits. When Kant, in his essay *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), reflects on the revolution that can be considered the beginning of the contemporary world — the French Revolution — he transforms it, in its pure revolutionary form, regardless of its historical context, results, or consequences, into a decisive moral and political

sign. Is there any concrete moment in history that could indicate, reliably, that humanity as a whole advances towards improvement? Is there any historical event that proves progress in the moral world? For Kant, the French Revolution is this sign of progress, not as a specific political transformation but as a public event, filling the hearts of spectators with enthusiasm, sympathetic participation, and faith in the realization of justice. Revolution is the actualization of freedom, and the utopia of its achievement beyond all time and history.

The present contribution aims at analysing this double meaning of the revolution as an ‘operational value in history’¹ through a particular group of articles Michel Foucault wrote and which have been more vigorously criticized than any other part of his oeuvre: the reporting he did for *Il Corriere della Sera* during his two journeys to Iran in September and November 1978. In these articles, Foucault describes the revolts against the Shah’s regime and suggests to read them against a certain understanding of the notion of revolution, through a fascinating and, at the same time, highly ambiguous concept: that of a ‘political spirituality’.² I shall briefly analyse this notion, exploring its link to the Western notion of revolution. I shall then argue that, despite Foucault’s rejection of this notion, revolution is still a very important concept to reactivate in order to think

1 Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, trans. by G. Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 20.

2 Michel Foucault, ‘À quoi rêvent les Iraniens?’ [1978], in *Dits et écrits*, ed. by Daniel Defert, François Ewald and Jacques Lagrange, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), II: 1976–1988, text no. 245, p. 694: ‘Quel sens, pour les hommes qui habitent [la terre d’Iran], à rechercher au prix même de leur vie cette chose dont nous avons, nous autres, oublié la possibilité depuis la Renaissance et les grandes crises du christianisme: une spiritualité politique.’

about the role and the possibility of political revolts and freedom today.

The Foucault Archive at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris contains the complete set of documents Foucault gathered during and after his Iranian journeys.³ I was most impressed by a journal of sorts Foucault kept while in Iran, full of historical, political, and personal notes about the country he was discovering. It shows a true journalistic spirit; the reader can feel Foucault's pleasure in discovering a country on the verge of a major political transformation and his desire to understand this historical turning point by analysing the economic, geopolitical, and cultural situation in Iran. He is not a philosopher looking at history from the superior standpoint of abstract reason, but a witness and a reporter giving voice to the historical fractures and forces he encounters on the ground.

Foucault is definitely fascinated by what could be called the 'negative character' of the Iranian revolt against Reza Pahlavi: it was a popular uprising, originated in a seemingly spontaneous way; there weren't, at the beginning, any main ideological directions, political parties, or institutions to guide it; and still, the revolt was massive, undivided, and capable of a major disruption of the political order. Foucault saw the rise of an entire unarmed people, united by the only aim of 'saying no to the Shah'. Before the return of Khomeini, the Shiite Islamic voices went along with the strong Marxist movement in Iran and other opposition forces. The religious state was a political utopia reconnecting with an idealized past, and Foucault couldn't imagine in 1978 that the revolt he was witnessing could result in an oppressive clerical regime. Most importantly, in

3 Michel Foucault Archives, Bibliothèque nationale de France, boîtes 50-50bis (NAF 28730).

his articles, he refuses to speak of an Iranian 'Revolution': this concept is for him ideologically charged, meaning a historical violent riot led and used by a political party, group, or class. One can say that Khomeini transformed the Iranian revolt into a revolution, but what Foucault first saw was a '*soulèvement*': the simple and negative opening of the possibility of a transformation in history; a disruption of the concrete political situation making room for something new to arise.

Revolution organizes itself according to a temporal economy: conditions, promises, necessities; it resides thus in history, makes its bed in it, and ultimately lies in it. The uprising [le *soulèvement*], breaking the order of time, raises men upright against their land and their humanity.⁴

Did Foucault underestimate the power of the Islamic clergy? Definitely. But was Khomeini's regime really the only possible outcome of the revolt against the Shah? Yet more importantly, even after the religious and despotic turn in Iran, Foucault claimed the relevance of a notion he first used in his Iranian reportage: that of a 'political spirituality'. It is clearly an ambiguous expression, one which resulted at the end of the 1970s in a massive critique of the French philosopher, accusing him to have indirectly legitimated the Khomeinist regime. Actually, Foucault was far from imagining the theocratic outcome of the Iranian revolt. What he did see, however, was the massive

4 'La révolution s'organise selon toute une économie intérieure au temps: des conditions, des promesses, des nécessités; elle loge donc dans l'histoire, y fait son lit et finalement s'y couche. Le soulèvement, coupant le temps, dresse les hommes à la verticale de leur terre et de leur humanité.' ('Vivre autrement le temps' [1979], in *Dits et écrits*, II: text no. 267, pp. 788–90 (p. 790) [my translation]).

potential of a revolt rooted in a religious and existential dimension.

The importance of Foucault's articles lies in the insights they provide into the essential role Islam and its 'political spirituality' — Islam as a 'political force'⁵ — was and arguably is to play in the contemporary geopolitical world. Foucault sees in the Iranian revolts and in the revolutionary energy unleashed by their mobilization of Islamic religion a new form of opposition to state power, that is to say: to a modern Western political order, its army, its police, its embassies. The Iranian revolt is, in Foucault's eyes, a 'counter-behaviour' to the governmentality of the modern state. As such, it can serve as a privileged platform for political observation and experimentation. The Western-style 'modernization' coveted by the Shah and by United States policy towards Iran is actually an attempt to reproduce Eurocentric models of state organization. And the revolts against these attempts are for Foucault 'perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane.'⁶ In Iran, religion proves to be a force that is able to oppose the existential and political constraints of the very modern state whose history Foucault had so tirelessly reconstructed in order to find new ways to criticize it.

Foucault is aware that Islam risks becoming 'a gigantic powder-keg' on a global scale.⁷ His statements are clearly relevant today, in light of what has since happened in the

5 Michel Foucault, 'Foucault's Response to Atoussa H.' [1978], trans. by Karen de Bruin and Kevin B. Anderson, in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 210.

6 Michel Foucault, 'The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt' [1978], trans. by Karen de Bruin and Kevin B. Anderson, in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, pp. 220–23 (p. 222).

7 Michel Foucault, 'A Powder Keg Called Islam' [1979], trans. by Karen

Middle East and in Europe: the rise of religious radicalism, the increasing numbers of migrants fleeing conflicts in Islamic countries, the West's difficulties in intervening and imposing its control and its security strategies. Foucault interrogates the field of ethical-political subjectivation for a Europe (a European way of conceiving of the state) that is in decline and a West which is globalizing the world, yet finds itself called into question by this very process of globalization. Through his reflections on the particular case of Iran, he raises the general question: beyond the European identity crisis, how, and by means of what poles and relations, do we create political subjectivities?

Paradoxically enough, Foucault deploys a massive set of knowledge about Iranian history and Islamic religion in order to develop a strictly Eurocentric reflection on revolt and revolution. Foucault said the Iranian revolt was not, at its beginning, a revolution, as it was not dominated by an ideology. And yet, it was a concrete example of what revolution has meant in Western thought since Kant and the French Revolution: the opening of new possibilities in time and history, demanding a form of philosophical discourse which is no longer the ahistorical investigation of the universal conditions of human thought but the response to actual political needs. Foucault's various analyses of Kant's 1784 essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment' prove this point: revolution has been, for the contemporary Western world, the actual evidence that history is an open process, through which it has to rethink and test its forms of discourse, thought, and existence. Could Iran and its 'revolt/revolution' play the same

de Bruin and Kevin B. Anderson, in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, pp. 239–41 (p. 241).

role of critique for 1970s and 1980s Europe, and maybe for today's world?

Foucault's controversial concept of 'political spirituality' must not be thought as a sort of apologetic of a political power built on religion. Rather, it conveys the important idea that a true political movement cannot exist unless it is built on an existential transformation — that is the sense of the notion of 'spirituality' used by Foucault later, in the 1980s, to indicate the exercises of the self. In all likelihood, Foucault stresses the fact that religion is (and has been in Western history) a massive political force also strategically, against the French doctrine of laicism as a sort of 'anaesthetization' of the political sphere. The real question Foucault poses to the present moment would then be: are political spirituality and revolution possible outside ideological dogmas? Which political energy can be deployed today that is rooted in existential practices and strong enough to be the motor of historical change?

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