

Dialogue between Michel Foucault & Baqir Parham

on Marx, Islam, Christianity & revolution

Note by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson: In 1978, as the protests against the shah were becoming a mass movement, Michel Foucault made his first visit to Iran. During the next eight months, Foucault wrote a number of articles on the Iranian Revolution for “*Corriere della Sera*,” “*Le Monde*,” and other publications. These articles constitute the most sustained treatment anywhere in his writings of a non-Western society. Foucault’s support for Iran’s Islamist movement touched off a controversy that continues to this day.

This conversation, conducted in Iran in September of 1978 with the noted writer Baqir Parham, includes Foucault’s first reflections on the Iranian Revolution. In addition, it connects his concern with Iran to his larger critique of Western modernity. It shows how his search for new forms of resistance to modernity had led him to look at religious revolts.

This dialogue was published in “*Nameh-yi Kanun-i Nevisandegan*” (Publication of the Center of Iranian Writers), No. 1, Spring 1979, pages 9 – 17. It has been translated from the Persian by Janet Afary. We thank Baqir Parham and the University of Chicago Press

Excerpted from the forthcoming *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, published in the United States by the University of Chicago Press.

© 2005 by the University of Chicago. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

for permission to publish this material in “*Dædalus*.”

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

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

1 This city is the Shiite religious center of Iran.

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

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

In France and in Europe in general, ever since the French Revolution, the

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

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

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

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

PARHAM: Very well. You see, we have witnessed a closeness between philosophy and political reality. I wanted to ask you, with regard to this proximity be-

*Marx,
Islam,
Christianity
& revolution*

tween philosophy and politics, do you see any basic change in the philosophical worldview of our time? And if so, what is its foundation and its nature?

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

The second painful experience is the one that emerged not between the philosopher and bourgeois society, but between revolutionary thinkers and the socialist states we know today. Out of

the visions of Marx, the visions of socialists, from their thoughts and their analyses, which were among the most objective, rational, and seemingly accurate thoughts and analyses, emerged in actuality political systems, social organizations, and economic mechanisms that today are condemned and ought to be discarded. Thus, I think both of these experiences were painful ones, and we are still living through the second one, not just in thought but also in life.

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

I think we live at a point of extreme darkness and extreme brightness. Extreme darkness, because we really do not know from which direction the light will come. Extreme brightness, because we ought to have the courage to begin anew. We have to abandon every dogmatic principle and to question one by one the validity of all the principles that have been the source of oppression. From the point of view of political thought we are, so to speak, at point zero. We have to construct another political thought, another political imagination, and teach anew the vision of a future. I am saying this so that you know that any Westerner, any Western intellectual with some integrity, cannot be indifferent to what

she or he hears about Iran, a nation that has reached a number of social, political, and so forth dead ends. At the same time, there are those who struggle to present a different way of thinking about social and political organization, one that takes nothing from Western philosophy, from its juridical and revolutionary foundations. In other words, they try to present an alternative based on Islamic teachings.

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

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

existed. You had a Safavid Shiism³ and against it you have tried to resurrect an Alavid Shiism.⁴ All of this is accurate. But on the whole, and despite changes that occurred in the nature of religion due to the proximity between Shiism and state power in that period, religion has nevertheless played an oppositional role.

In the Christian centers of the world, the situation is more complicated. Still, it would be naïve and incorrect if we said that religion in its Christian form was the opium of the people, while in its Islamic form it has been a source of popular awakening. I am astonished by the connections and even the similarities that exist between Shiism and some of the religious movements in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, up to the seventeenth or eighteenth century. These were great popular movements against feudal lords, against the first cruel formations of bourgeois society, great protests against the all-powerful control of the state. In Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before they adopted a directly political form, all such movements appeared as religious movements. Take,

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

4 Literally, the Shiism of Ali. Ali was Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, as well as the fourth caliph (656 – 661 C.E.). The notion of returning to an original, supposedly uncorrupted Shiism, in which martyrdom was the supreme virtue, was developed by the lay Muslim theologian Ali Shariati. Shariati, who died in 1977 after what many Iranians assumed at the time was foul play from the government, had received a doctorate in philology from the Sorbonne. His writings had a dramatic impact on a whole generation of Iranian activists. At the time of the revolution, his picture was carried alongside that of Khomeini in the demonstrations.

*Marx,
Islam,
Christianity
& revolution*

for example, the Anabaptists, who were allied to such a movement during Germany's Peasant Wars.⁵ It was a movement that rejected the power of the state, government bureaucracy, social and religious hierarchies – everything. This movement supported the right to individual conscience and the independence of small religious groups that wished to be together, have their own organizations, without hierarchy or social stratification between them. These were all extremely important social movements that left their mark on the religious and political consciousness of the West. In England, during the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth century, underneath the bourgeois and parliamentary revolutions as such, we had a complete series of religious-political struggles. These movements were religious because they were political and political because they were religious, and were very important. I therefore think that the history of religions, and their deep connection to politics, ought to be thought anew.

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

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

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

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

Beyond this, there is the fact that in the 1960s in the West, especially in France, a change took place in the form of analysis and philosophical thinking. Briefly, without wishing to enter a debate, the issue is this: From the time of Descartes until now, the point of origin of philosophical thought was the subject, and the foundational subject of philosophy was to determine what is the subject, what is self-consciousness. Is the subject free? Is self-consciousness absolute self-consciousness? In other words, is it aware of itself? In sum, can self-consciousness, as Hegel said, become worldly?

Around the 1960s, after the world became more connected with technique and technical knowledge, I believe that

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

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

Now I turn to myself, since your question was for me. My first book was called *Madness and Civilization*, but in fact my problem was rationality, that is, how does reason operate in a society such as ours? Well, to understand this issue, instead of beginning with the subject moving from awareness to reason, it is better if we see how, in the Western world, those who are not the subjects of reason,

those who are not considered reasonable, that is, those who are mad, are removed from the life process. Starting with this practice, with this constellation of real practices, and finally, a process of negation, we reach the point where we can see the place of reason. Or we find out that reason is not just the movements and actions of rational structures, but the movements of the structures and the mechanisms of power. Reason is what sets aside madness. Reason is what gives itself the right and the means to set aside madness.

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

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

My studies on the issues of youth crime and prison are of a similar nature. I want to show what are the existing

*Marx,
Islam,
Christianity
& revolution*

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