

# 'The madness of Islam'

## Foucault's Occident and the Revolution in Iran

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Indeed, if a philosophy of the future exists, it will have to be born outside Europe, or as a consequence of the encounters and frictions between Europe and non-Europe.

Michel Foucault in interview, 1978<sup>1</sup>

In looking through the half-dozen articles Foucault published on the Iranian Revolution, it is interesting to see beneath the title of one piece – 'The Mythical Head of the Iranian Revolt' – a brief footnote: 'The title proposed by M. Foucault was "The Madness of Iran".<sup>2</sup> *La folie de l'Iran*. There is no explanation for why the title was rejected, no way of knowing whether it was too dramatic, too ambivalent, or perhaps simply misleading. *La folie de l'Iran*. It is a title which, after all, might have been bereft of irony had it been written by anyone but Foucault, Islam and mental derangement – the mad Mahdi, the crazed mullah, Christendom's epileptic Prophet – being a standard motif in Western responses to Islam. The obvious irony of Foucault's title and the thoughts it unwittingly provokes (what kind of madness did Foucault discern in Iran? How different was it from the madness Foucault described for us in the Hôpital Général, the kind of madness controlled and treated by the likes of Tuke and Pinel? What kind of *histoire de l'Islam* would the author of *Histoire de la folie* have written?) at once illustrate and problematize Foucault's relationship with Islam. On the one hand, like Nietzsche, Foucault will always be aware of 'the thousand-year old reproach of fanaticism' which has been directed at Islam and the perennial outsider status it has been given by the West;<sup>3</sup> on the other, the very European 'outsiderness' which Foucault analyses and appropriates will simultaneously be of *use*. The complexity of Foucault's approach to the Islamic Other – be it Tunisian demonstrators or Iranian Shiites – lies in this consecutive (at times even concurrent) analysis and appropriation of Islam's alterity. A critique, in other words, of what makes Islam *other*, but at the same time a use of such 'otherness' which keeps Islam squarely in its place.

When one considers the enormous influence of Foucault and his rigorous historicizing analyses upon a whole generation of cultural studies scholars, the significance of what Islam and Islamic cultures actually mean in Foucault's writings becomes doubly important. Bearing in mind Edward Said's own indebtedness (in his ground-breaking 1978 study *Orientalism*) to the Foucauldian notion of discourse – the central role 'discourse' plays in Said's own classification and analysis of modern British and French Orientalism – it will be interesting to see how Islam features in the writings of a thinker who, perhaps more than anyone else, is responsible for the historical understanding of alterity.

### 'We Westerners'

Before even beginning to talk about Foucault and Islam, however, we should first consider the place of a much wider Orient in Foucault's writings, an Orient which includes China and Japan as well as Tunisia and Iran. Two fairly obvious yet unignorable points have to be made here: the importance of the West in Foucault's various projects, and the profound influence of Nietzsche upon Foucault's evaluation of non-European cultures. The word *occident* proliferates throughout Foucault's *oeuvre*. With the noun or adjective, abstract or qualifier, *chronos*, *topos* or *logos*, Foucault is forever reminding us of the Western specificity of his subject. The descriptions of his various projects bear this out; whether it is the 'analysis ... of historical consciousness in the West' (his description of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>4</sup>), a 'history ... of techniques of power in the West'<sup>5</sup> or his attempt, in *The Order of Things*, 'to uncover the deepest strata of Western culture',<sup>6</sup> Foucault has always been careful not to stray too far outside the limits of his tribe. This repetition of the word 'Occident', as one might expect, is Foucault's way of emphasizing the geocultural locatedness of the language-game he is studying, one more technique (among the many Foucault adopts) of

avoiding any lapse into an unthinking universalism. Foucault's curious love affair with this term – 'we Western others',<sup>7</sup> the 'limit-experience of the Western world',<sup>8</sup> not to mention such bolder assertions such as 'Western man is inseparable from God'<sup>9</sup> – is certainly the consequence of a particular caution, the sensitive awareness of a certain vocabulary's limitations.

However, the paradox which emerges, not simply for Foucault but for anyone audacious enough to enact a non-Eurocentric critique of European thought, is that Foucault's perfectly laudable desire to delineate the finite, Occidental boundaries of the collection of practices and systems he is studying inevitably leads to a subtle essentialization of the West (and implicitly the East). Whilst this essentialization is neither banal nor obvious – it is, indeed, at times extremely original and thought-provoking – it nevertheless betrays an indebtedness to a number of familiar motifs. Wherever the West appears in Foucault's texts, stock associations of tragedy, individuality, inauthenticity and repression invariably follow, notions which subtly assume the absent Orient to be its inverse. Whenever the word 'Occident' occurs in Foucault, a certain gong is struck, one whose Oriental echo cannot fail to be heard.

This is not necessarily either a criticism or a judgement, both because Foucault was always articulately aware of the Western use of the Oriental artifice – what he called 'the [Oriental] dream, the vertiginous point where all nostalgias and promises of return are born'<sup>10</sup> – and because, far from 'essentializing' the West, Foucault insisted at several points on his desire to 'dispense with things', to 'de-presentify them', emphasizing an interest not in the 'rich, heavy, immediate plenitude' of entities but rather in the rules and relationships between rules which enable us to perceive them.<sup>11</sup> In moments such as his preface to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault was lucidly aware of the complications any discussion of historical concepts or entities could bring and that the use of such terms 'does not mark out impassable boundaries or closed systems'. Rather, says Foucault, all such work can ever reveal are 'transformable singularities'.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, there is a strange irony in the well-intentioned yet repeated emphasis on Westernness in Foucault's work; in trying to limit and demarcate a critique in order to preserve its internal coherence, one actually threatens the very stability one sought to preserve. Foucault's cautious insistence on the Westernness of his discursive histories actually invokes a number of problematic differences. Moreover, one of the biggest problems these differences suggest is

that Foucault's Orient is, in many respects, strangely similar to that of Nietzsche. As we will see, a number of characteristics which feature in Foucault's remarks on Far Eastern societies – honesty, authenticity, collectivity, permanence/immutability – will also play a central role in his work on Tunisia and Iran.

Foucault's West takes on a number of sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant characteristics which vary according to the Orient against which it is juxtaposed – China, Japan, Iran, Tunisia. Following Nietzsche, a certain idea of Eastern honesty, as opposed to Western superficiality/self-denial, seems to colour Foucault's Orient/Occident opposition. Whether this Oriental authenticity comes in the form of Tunisian intellectuals not easily impressed by the name Sartre or of a more honest and open acknowledgement of suicide among the Japanese,<sup>13</sup> Orientals clearly possess an honesty towards their societies – and their relationships with one another – which distinguishes them from superficial, repressed Westerners. Moreover, in linking this Oriental openness and honesty with the ancient Greeks and Romans, Foucault essentially repeats Nietzsche's representation of the East as a symbol of how Europeans *used to* think, as a place where the Greek/Roman open affirmation of masculinity, sexuality and hierarchy still remains intact. When Foucault asks why 'the West has insisted for so long on seeing the power it exercises as juridical and negative rather than as technical and positive',<sup>14</sup> it is difficult not to think of Nietzsche's Samurai, Persians and Arabs – those who, being unashamed of hierarchy, had a healthier attitude towards power and 'didn't believe in equality and equal rights'.<sup>15</sup>

What follows is a West which, if more mendacious than its Oriental counterpart, is also more complex. As one of the most original aspects of the Occident lies in the way it has formed an opposition between Reason and Unreason,<sup>16</sup> a whole host of very different complexities has arisen for the binary-thinking West as a result. We see this in the way individual Western subjectivities are juxtaposed to more homogenous Chinese collectivities, in Foucault's remarks, for example, on the way a Western Confucius has never really been possible:

in contrast to that which took place in the Orient, in particular in China and Japan, there has never been in the West (at least not for a very long time) a philosophy which was capable of bringing together the practical politics and the practical morality of a whole society. The West has never known the equivalent of Confucianism, that is to say a form of thought which, in reflecting the order of the world or in establishing it, at the same time prescribes the

structure of the State, the form of social relationships, individual conduct ...[N]ever did Aristotle play a role similar to that Confucius played in the Orient. There was never in the West a philosophical State.<sup>17</sup>

This resembles not only Foucault's description of the Iranian uprising as a single people crying with a single voice, but also his uncritical repetition of Nietzsche's observation that Plato, in Sicily, 'did not become Muhammed'.<sup>18</sup> One cannot escape the conclusion that Foucault's Orientals (be they Confucians, Arabs or Iranians) lend themselves to collectivities with greater ease than do Occidentals. In all fairness, the point is never explicitly stated; but in trying to delineate a difference in Eastern/Western political philosophies, a rather curious notion of Oriental holistic collectivity versus Occidental individuality seems to emerge, one which brings with it all the familiar associations of the West with individuality, self-assertion, activity and the tragic. Foucault's parenthetical remark – 'at least not for a very long time' – also reinscribes the entire passage within a certain timescale, counterposing an unchanging Orient against a constantly inventive, mutating Occident. This all-pervading harmony of philosophy and state which Foucault feels to be representative of modern China, a societal *ethos* permeating every aspect, every particular, can no longer be found in the West, which has long since moved on. In a completely unconventional way, Foucault's Orient becomes a paradise once again: the last Eden-like realm of a very Nietzschean innocence, a place where the simple power of the state to intervene and mould its subjects' reality is still seen as natural and unproblematic.

Because of the implicit (dare one say Rousseauistic?) proximity of the Orient to a more honest, open acknowledgement of sexuality and power – evident, for example, in Foucault's praise of the 'subtle blend of friendship and sensuality' found in relationships between Arab men, a homoerotic sexuality 'subsequently denied and rejected' in the modern West<sup>19</sup> – the Occident which emerges in such texts as *The Order of Things* and *The History of Sexuality* acquires a number of fairly distinctive characteristics. One such feature is a relentlessly structuring impulse in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century 'Western culture', one which sees the word no longer as what it represents, but rather according to how it functions, what changes it undergoes and how it relates to the rules governing the system it obeys.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on structure at the expense of the structured Foucault calls 'a backward jump' in Western thought, a focusing of attention more on what the word belongs to and away from what it

means.<sup>21</sup> It is a moment in Foucault's work which almost suggests an inwardness, an introspectiveness in Western thought, another Occidental succumbing to the illusion of depth and selfhood which the Orient has wisely ignored.

A third implicit feature of the West, in many ways a consequence of this fascination with structure, is that it is inventive, creative, productive. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault insists that this is not because the West has anything new or original to offer ('the West has not been capable of inventing any new pleasures, and it has doubtless not discovered any original vices'<sup>22</sup>). In its puritanical repressiveness, however, it has 'defined new rules for the games of powers and pleasures. In its desire to reify, structure and control the modes of sexuality, the Occident has



produced 'a proliferation of sexualities', an 'analytical multiplication of pleasure', a 'visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities'.<sup>23</sup> The relentlessly structuring impulse of Western thought, in seeking to delimit and control a certain energy, actually serves as a condition for its creativity. All of which does make one wonder what kind of *History of Sexuality* Foucault would have written for the East, if such a thing were possible.

Foucault also draws on and elaborates the familiar synonymy of the West with tragedy and the demise/murder of God, an association which implicitly suggests the equally familiar Eastern impossibility of the

tragic. Of course, in the history of representations of the Orient there have been various reasons why Western writers felt the East to be somehow oblivious/invulnerable to the tragic. Borges's Averroes, we will recall, 'enclosed within the orb of Islam', believed in a universe ruled by an all-merciful, all-compassionate God, one which simply had no space for a word like *tragodia*. In contrast to this Oriental innocence, Yeats's serene Chinamen in 'Lapis Lazuli', sitting on their mountain top in tranquillity, are impervious to the tragic because of something they *know*, and not because they have yet to grasp some dark truth about a hostile or indifferent universe. In between these two very different Western explanations for the Oriental incomprehension of the tragic, Foucault steers a sophisticated middle course:

God is perhaps not so much a region beyond knowledge as something prior to the sentences we speak; and if Western man is inseparable from him, it is not because of some invincible propensity to go beyond the frontiers of experience, but because his language ceaselessly foments him in the shadow of his laws.<sup>24</sup>

Foucault goes on to quote Nietzsche's affirmation that to believe in grammar is to believe in God. Clearly, of all the structures the West has formulated, of all the new perversions and neuroses it has invented, the neurosis known as God is perhaps the most persistent. In its insistence on the 'inseparability' of man and God, the passage takes on a mystical, almost Sufi-like quality – even if the bond which unites the mortal and the divine here is not that of a common source, but rather that of a common illusion. Man and God are twin fictions, parallel effects of a very Western use of language, not lovers or complementary manifestations of some transcendental, omnipresent Power. And yet this idea of a God, in all its unthinkability, is nothing more than an extension of what Foucault calls 'the unthought'. What is peculiar to Western thought is how it is 'imbued with the necessity of thinking the unthought'. The enigmatic source that feeds the Occident's relentless desire for structure and configuration is the same that subsequently motivates the dismantling of these structures. The West, in other words, in its constant testing of the limits of language, in its inherent desire to think the unthought, creates its Gods and subjectivities only to destroy them. When Foucault writes how 'modern thought is advancing towards that region where man's Other must become the Same as himself',<sup>25</sup> it is tempting to see not merely something circular in this reunion of man's alterity with his ipseity, but also a form of return to the East,

to that early, Oriental stage of the West which existed before the advance of Cartesian modernity.

This East, forever unspoken, always 'unthought', lies like a palimpsest beneath the lines of Foucault's text. In between such Spengleresque phrases as 'the fate of the West', 'our modernity' and 'the old rational goal of the West',<sup>26</sup> lies a silent Orient, tacitly taking on like an obedient handmaid all the inverse qualities assigned to it – stasis, serenity, freedom from theism and all the tragedy the absence of tragedy invokes.

### Tunisia: first encounter with the Orient

After having stayed in the French university long enough to do what had to be done and to be what one has to be, I wandered about abroad, and that gave my myopic gaze a sense of distance, and may have allowed me to re-establish a better perspective on things.<sup>27</sup>

Foucault's belief that a philosophy of the future could only come from outside of Europe finds its most concrete manifestation in the two years he spent at the University of Tunis between 1966 and 1968. In our attempt to understand his representation of the Iranian Revolution, Foucault's stay in Tunisia is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it replicates almost to the letter Nietzsche's own intention to spend 'one or two years in Tunis', in order to rid himself of the 'senile short-sightedness' (*greisenhafte Kurzsichtigkeit*) of most Europeans and acquire a 'sharper eye'.<sup>28</sup> Second, it represents Foucault's first (and only) residence in a Muslim country, and in some ways the experiences Foucault records there will be repeated a decade later when he writes about Iran. Finally, it was during Foucault's two-year stay in Sidi Bou Saïd that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was written, adding yet another example to the history of intellectuals (Joyce, Auerbach, Bowles) temporarily exiling themselves from their own cultures in order to write about them.

Although Tunisia was not technically Foucault's first encounter with a Muslim country – he had previously enjoyed several holidays in neighbouring Morocco – it was certainly the most sustained, and it took place at a crucial point in France's own postwar history: the political upheavals of 1968. Many years later, Foucault would be proud of having 'never participated in person in one of the decisive experiences of modern France'.<sup>29</sup> And yet the epistemological advantages Tunisia's peripherality offered Foucault in his critique of European thought-systems do suggest that, in many ways, the author of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* never mentally went to Tunisia. However visually appealing is the image of Foucault calmly reading Feuerbach in the middle of a crowd of Arab children,<sup>30</sup> or sending

dried figs and dates in the post to the Klossowskis, the fact remains that Foucault wrote and said very little about the country in which he spent two years – sometimes, in interviews, he appeared to forget that he had ever been there at all.<sup>31</sup> This paucity of attention underlines the fact that Foucault's stay in North Africa was motivated not so much by what Tunisia *was*, but rather by what it was not.

In retrospect, Foucault's stay in Tunisia probably had a number of motivations outside the Nietzschean desire for a different set of lenses. As Foucault, on more than one occasion, defined the crisis of Western thought as nothing other than the end of imperialism,<sup>32</sup> situating himself in a country which had just freed itself from a colonial oppressor would be the perfect vantage point from which to examine the crisis. If the dissolution of the rational, autonomous, thinking subject really is a consequence of European 'man' losing his dominant, imperialistic identity in the decentring movement of the postcolonial, then a newly independent country such as Tunisia would allow one to experience this process first-hand. Foucault, it should be added, saw the colonial struggle in Tunisia as ongoing even after independence had come. The student struggle against French-language 'University and scholastic authority', although parallel with developments in France and the United States, was also connected in North Africa with the question of 'neocolonialism and national independence'.<sup>33</sup> For Foucault, Tunisian students (in contrast with their European and American comrades) were demonstrating not simply against capitalist power, but also against capitalist colonialism.

Curiosity, too, played a part. Not necessarily Nietzsche's curiosity – 'how can other cultures help me to view my own differently?' – but rather the kind of *Neugier* which would enable the creation of new selves: the 'curiosity' Foucault wrote of, towards the end of his life, 'in undertaking to know how, and up to what limit, it would be possible to think differently'.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, Foucault spoke of his Swedish and Polish experiences as giving him a taste of what were 'at that time, the different possibilities of Western societies'.<sup>35</sup> Tunisia's radical difference, in this respect, probably represented one more strand in Foucault's search for the limits of the possible, whether in terms of society, philosophy or self. Although some of the more popular criticism of Foucault over the years has been devoted to exploring and speculating on the sexual dimension of this 'curiosity', it would be naive to deny that the Orient (in particular the Arab Orient) held a certain sexual fascination for Foucault, and may even have been an ulterior motive in his trip to Iran.

What did Foucault find in Tunisia? From the few remarks Foucault makes about the country and its inhabitants, one can identify three things straightaway: honesty, danger and energy. 'For a long time I've been unable to put up with the airs certain French intellectuals give themselves', he said years later; 'In North Africa, everyone is taken for what they are worth. Everyone has to affirm themselves by what they do or say, not by their renown.'<sup>36</sup> The remark has a certain existentialist flavour to it – North Africa and *authenticité* bringing Camus most obviously to mind – although Foucault seemed relieved to have found a country where no one 'bats an eyelid' (*fait un bond*) at the mention of Sartre. This classic flight from the fantasy of European oversophistication and falsity to that of non-European simplicity and candidness is obviously problematic, not least in the implication of the enviable yet slightly primitive proximity of the North African to his feelings and body, in contrast to the more mendacious and artificial distance the European tries to put between the two.

The idea emerges again when Foucault speaks of the energy of Tunisian youth, particularly in the student demonstrations he had witnessed there. Although the 'Marxist background of the Tunisian students was not very profound', this lack of a theoretical approach was compensated by the 'violence', 'radical intensity' and 'impressive momentum' of their actions. Whereas for their European counterparts, Marxism was simply 'a better way of analysing reality', for the student movements Foucault witnessed in Tunisia it constituted 'a kind of moral energy, wholly remarkable'.<sup>37</sup> A Tunisian politics of the heart, rather than the head, seems to have impressed a Foucault weary of the endless arm-chair intellectualizing he had left behind in Paris.

Again the comment – like Nietzsche's praise of Islam's life-affirming nature and the Arab rejection of democracy – is positive and well-intentioned; Foucault genuinely appears to have found something refreshingly *active* about the political struggles he witnessed in Tunisia. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how, for both thinkers, the journey from North to South involves, however subtly, a journey from mind to body, thought to feeling, cogitation to courage, academic reflection to violent action. In this critique of a European political *milieu* paralysed and stultified by the very debates which should be liberating it (discussions on *hyper-marxisme* and *groupuscularisation*<sup>38</sup>), the Tunisians emerge as less intellectually burdened by all these theoretical complications. Inevitably, this leads to a reversal of the 'West as Reality/Orient as Illusion' opposition; the real – real feelings, real action, real

danger, real beliefs – lies in the East, not in the parody of intellectual pretensions and academic ideologies Foucault has left behind. Foucault's perception of the European insulation from reality, the way he distinguishes between the real politics he saw in Tunis and the superficial, pseudo-politics he criticizes in France, is emphasized in the element of danger he sensed in the Tunisian struggle: 'There is no comparison between the barricades of the Latin quarter and the real risk of getting, as in Tunisia, fifteen years in jail.' Europe once more represents safety, comfort and mendacity, the implicit existentialist criticism here confirmed in the way Foucault speaks of Tunisia as a moment where he had to decide whether or not to voice publicly his opposition to Bourguiba's regime. Hiding fugitives in his house and offering whatever support he could to the underground student movement, Foucault could describe his Tunisian years as the moment when he engaged for the first time in genuine political debate – 'not May '68 in France, but March '68 in a third world country'.<sup>39</sup>

### Iran: the archaism of modernity

Astonishing destiny of Persia. At the dawn of history, it invented administration and the state: it entrusted the recipe to Islam and its administrators supplied the Arab empire with civil servants. But from this same Islam it has derived a religion which has not ceased, through the centuries, to provide an irreducible force to all that which, at the base of a people, can oppose the power of a state.<sup>40</sup>

In both Tunisia and Iran, Foucault appeared to find an energy which had not been able to manifest itself so intensely within the traditional boundaries of Christian Europe. In both countries, Foucault had been shocked by the expression of a force, the irresistible strength of an opposition whose very possibility he had not allowed for within European parameters. Keating is quite right to discern 'a largely unarticulated theory of resistance' in Foucault's Iranian writings;<sup>41</sup> in many ways, Foucault experienced something in Iran he thought he 'would never encounter' in his life.<sup>42</sup> And yet, however similarly impressed Foucault was by the students in Tunis and the demonstrations in Tehran, two important elements colour his observations on Iran differently with respect to the Tunisian experiences of a decade earlier: temporality and Islam.

Although general reaction to the Iranian Revolution in the mainstream Western press was predictably concerned with economic stability – the *New York Times*, *Business Week* and *Euromoney* all carrying scare headlines of alarm for stock and oil prices<sup>43</sup> – the response of the international, intellectual Left

was understandably mixed. Socialist commentators were visibly uncomfortable at having to deal with a Third World, clearly anti-imperialist people's revolution which was nevertheless profoundly religious in nature. The question of whether one's anti-capitalism should be allowed to override one's anti-clericalism was clearly a difficult one; the fact that Foucault, at least for a while, permitted his to do so appeared to irritate many. Among the Left, most British and US commentators appeared to acknowledge the United States' 'twenty-five years of foreign-imposed dictatorship' on Iran and SAVAK's 'brutal suppression' of the Shah's opponents, not to mention the recognition of the genuinely widespread support of the people for the removal of the Pahlavi regime – what one commentator called, anticipating Foucault's own observation, 'a most amazing demonstration of a palpable, almost tangible popular will'.<sup>44</sup> There were, understandably, reservations concerning the fundamentalist nature of the Messianic figure of Khomeini – a figure who, in the words of one, 'invokes some mystical unity' whilst refusing to accept the democratic pressures of 'regional autonomy' for the varied groups within Iranian society.<sup>45</sup> The fate of Tudeh or the Iranian Marxist Party also worried many journalists, even if initially many were encouraged by the early (and short-lived) tolerance of the secular Left in the Khomeini regime.<sup>46</sup>

Certainly mainstream French responses to the event varied in their subtlety and sophistication, from Eric Rouleau's simplistic question to Khomeini in 1978 – 'You say that in Iran an Islamic Republic should be established. This is not clear to us the French, because a republic can exist without any religious foundation. What is your view?'<sup>47</sup> – to the Belgian journalist from *Le Monde Diplomatique* who was able to evaluate the high intellectual level of the younger mullahs who had been graduating from the Koranic universities.<sup>48</sup> It should be said that none of the four popular myths John L. Esposito discerns in Western responses to the revolution in Iran (that it was narrowly, exclusively religious; that it was, before and after, confused and disorganized; that it followed a predictable, unsophisticatedly religious course; and, finally, that there were no Iranian moderates) can be discerned in Foucault's analyses, for which he nevertheless received much criticism.<sup>49</sup> As David Drake has already pointed out, some of this criticism was hypocritical – the journalists Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, who were scathing in their contempt for Foucault's sympathetic treatment of the revolution, had themselves been zealous, pro-Chinese Maoists a few years earlier.<sup>50</sup> Although

Foucault's positive, at times even esoteric, response<sup>51</sup> to the events in Tehran was by no means representative of the French intellectual Left, it was far from unusual. The French Communist Party (PCF) had long courted controversy during the 1970s with their sympathy both for Third World revolutions and Soviet policy, from their opposition to Giscard's threat to occupy Lebanon in 1975 to their support for the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.<sup>52</sup> Various members of the Tel Quel group – Barthes and Kristeva among them – had travelled to Maoist China to observe the new society, although Philippe Sollers's reaction to Khomeini's revolution was, and would continue to be, explicitly negative. 'We wish to illuminate history from the exception – and not from the rule or the community', he declared in 1980, and events such as the Rushdie Affair only served to strengthen Sollers's conviction of the Iranian Revolution as one more form of tyranny (a tyranny, moreover, whose origins he was later to locate in the terror of Robespierre).<sup>53</sup>

In reading Foucault's articles on the events of 1978, one is struck by how closely Foucault's Islam resembles that of Nietzsche: life-affirming, medieval, militaristic, this-worldly, possessing a 'regime of truth' closer to that of 'Greeks ... and the Arabs of the Maghreb'.<sup>54</sup> The Islam we encounter in articles such as 'Tehran: Faith against the Shah' enjoys a near synonymy with life, consciousness and vitality:

Do you know the phrase which is most mocked by Iranians nowadays? The phrase which seems to them the most ridiculous, the most senseless, the most Western? 'Religion is the opium of the people.' Up to the present dynasty, the mullahs preached in their mosques with a rifle by their side.<sup>55</sup>

There is almost a delight here in the *exceptionality* of Islam, the radical difference of a belief-system which cannot be easily accounted for by the universalist pretensions of European political thought. What Foucault seems to foreground in his Iranian articles, more than anybody else, is the utter unexpectedness of Islam, its incongruity with traditional, secular, left-wing political analysis, revealing one of the most grandiose phrases in European political thought to be nothing more than a certain remark, made at a certain time, in a certain place. (Recall Foucault's own notorious remark, which would earn him the contempt of a generation of Marxists, 'Marxism exists in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water.'<sup>56</sup>) Most probably, Foucault saw Iran's blatantly religious revolution as an opportunity to remind Marxists of their own epistemological finitude. Iran, the passage seems to be saying, has

reminded 'us Europeans' of the cultural finiteness of our idea of revolution.

Although Foucault follows Nietzsche in his depiction of a 'life-affirming Semitic religion', he does not set this image of a life-loving Islam against a negative, life-denying Christianity (as the author of *The Antichrist* did). What we see, rather, is the invocation of similar revolutionary figures from the history of Western Christendom: Cromwell's Presbyterians, Savonarola, the Anabaptists of Münster.<sup>57</sup> Once again, Islam becomes an example of how Europe used to think, a nostalgic glimpse of the European past through the Islamic present. In several places this idea becomes quite explicit:

That sense of looking, even at the price of one's life, for something whose possibility the rest of us have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crises of Christianity: a *political spirituality*. I already hear the French who are laughing, but I know that they are wrong.<sup>58</sup>

It is as if Foucault, in travelling to Iran, is travelling back in time. The possibility of a transcendental faith which can move things in this world, rather like the intimately homoerotic bonding between Arab men, belongs to a set of practices in which 'we' Europeans no longer believe. Implicit in Foucault's remarks on North Africa but never quite articulated is the apparent standing of Iran and Tunisia outside the temporality of Europe. The location is, in one respect, a positive one: because structures in Iran have remained 'indissociatively social and religious', the possibility of a spiritual dimension to the political quotidian has remained intact. And yet Foucault's point is not merely a sociological one; in the context of his writings, the East becomes imbued once more with a tremendous positivity, the retainer of a forgotten vitality, the preserver of a wisdom which has long since trickled away through European fingers.

This emphasis on the irreducibility of the Iranian phenomenon – on the way a Muslim country can completely overturn Western conceptions not only of modernity but of how countries become modern – is seen again in the way Foucault uses Iran to invert a familiar dualism:

I had then the sensation of understanding that these recent events did not signify the gathering together of the most reactionary groups before a brutal modernization; but the rejection, by an entire people and an entire culture, of a *modernization* which is in itself an *archaism*.<sup>59</sup>

The frequent references to Tocqueville, 'regime' and *laïcisation* underline the main drift of Foucault's

article – that what he is seeing is, in effect, a reversal of the French Revolution. Once again, Iran provides an opportunity to upset the comfortable, entirely Hegelian timeline of Europe and its relentless progress towards modernity. The energy of the Islamic revolution, in this sense, becomes a disruptive energy, a positive moment of discontinuity. By labelling modernity an ‘archaism’, Foucault turns a mullah-led revolt against a Westernizing oligarchy into a complete rejection of the Western *arche*, a fundamental disagreement on where history begins, and where it must necessarily end. As an example of bio-power or a latent theory of resistance, Iran serves this purpose in the wider context of Foucault’s writings: a collider of Occidental teleologies, a provincializer of Western historiography, an unexpected blip in the complacent calculations of the modern secular historian.

This idea of the Islamic Revolution as a dislocative, subversive force with regard to ‘Occidental’ temporality brings in another aspect of Islam in Foucault’s articles: namely, its madness. The madness of Iran – the



suppressed, writhing, uncontainable energy of a people yearning to break free from Western hegemony – lies unarticulated beneath all his descriptions of chanting crowds, singularly energetic demonstrations, indissolubly collective wills. In certain passages, however, the point becomes explicit:

This is the uprising of men with their bare hands who want to lift off the formidable weight which weighs on each of us, but especially on them, those petroleum workers, those farmers on the outskirts of empires: the weight of a global order. It is perhaps the first major insurrection against the planetary system, the most modern and maddest form of revolt.<sup>60</sup>

But in what, exactly, does the madness of Iran consist? How close is the wild energy of Iranians (and

Tunisians) to the ‘measureless violence of madness’ of the deranged in Foucault’s earlier work, the ‘delirious excitement of insanity’ (to use Tuke’s words<sup>61</sup>) which we see depicted in *Madness and Civilisation*? The mad energy of the Islamic revolution, as it resists the control and containment of the West and reverses history with its own vigorous self-description, offers the same kind of disruptive threat to Western structures as ‘the free terror of madness’ did, in Foucault’s book, for the institutions of the eighteenth century.<sup>62</sup>

### Déjà vu

In essence, Foucault’s use of the Orient poses the same problems for us as Nietzsche’s: how to respond to the unconventional use of a conventional stereotype of Islam in a critique of Western modernity? Of course, in one sense the madness of Foucault’s Iran has nothing to do with the kind of madness which has always been stereotypically attributed to mad mullahs and fanatical Mohammedans. Foucault’s now famous interpretation of the eighteenth-century treatment of madness

forces us to understand in a different way the *folie* he attributes to the Islamic Revolution – a *folie* of irrepressible energy, rather than mental derangement or delusions of grandeur. Perhaps it is irrelevant to ask how far Foucault’s description of madness is an ironic pun on his own work, and how far he is playing with a familiar history of Islamic stereotypes. An ironic (and therefore charitable) reading of the madness Foucault

attributes to Iran is dependent on a familiarity with Foucault’s specific use of the word, relying on a most un-Foucauldian idea of author intention in order to see the irony. To choose this path is certainly not mistaken, but when doing so two points must be borne in mind. First, in linking madness with Islam, Foucault effectively draws on an already extant store of motifs concerning Islam, even in the act of subverting them. Second, the intended audience of Foucault’s article, by no means academic, undermines the sophistication of Foucault’s gesture and suggests, perhaps, a more practical populism in Foucault’s journalism strikingly absent in the more careful prose of Foucault’s theory. Some of the flashier phrases in the newspaper articles – ‘Persia at the dawn of history’, for example, or the

description of Islam as a ‘giant powder-keg’<sup>63</sup> waiting to explode – would seem to underline this very practical use of imagery in Foucault’s popular writing.

Examining Foucault’s representation of Islam and Islamic cultures in his writings, there remain two characteristics which remind us that, for all his subtlety and intelligence, we are still reading the thoughts of a Western thinker about the East. Both of these characteristics reflect two standard Orientalist responses to the Islamic Orient: namely, an impression of its wholeness and absence of individuality, and an equally strong conviction of the permanence and immutability of its institutions. Foucault frequently refers to the unity and solidarity of the Iranian Revolution both in interviews and in his articles, appearing to have been struck by the unanimity of ‘an absolutely collective will’<sup>64</sup> to the extent that he overlooks any sense of individuality or internal struggles in the uprising:

The paradox is that it constitutes a perfectly unified collective will. It is astonishing to see this immense country, with a population scattered around two huge desert plateaux, this country which has been able to offer itself the latest sophistications in technology next to forms of life which have been immobile for a millennium, this country bridled by a censorship and the absence of liberties which has shown, despite everything, such a formidable unity. It is the same protest, the same will which is expressed by a doctor in Tehran and a mullah in the provinces, by a petrol worker, a postal employee or a student in a chador. This will has something disconcerting about it.<sup>65</sup>

As in Tunisia, Foucault is struck by the, doubtless un-Western, energy and conviction in the protests he witnesses. Even so, a certain unease, a sensation of strangeness, momentarily punctuates Foucault’s otherwise positive and fascinated description of events. The curious – one almost feels *unheimlich* – intensity of the collectivity Foucault narrates has a mystical air to it – indeed, Foucault had already written of the ‘power of a mysterious current’<sup>66</sup> between Khomeini and his people – an uncanniness by which Foucault himself seems unsettled. More importantly, especially for a thinker as self-critical as Foucault, there appears to be no element of self-doubt in his analysis. At no point in any of the articles does Foucault wonder whether his conviction of the oneness, the unity of what he saw may have been facilitated by his utter unfamiliarity with the culture he was observing. This is not to undermine what Foucault asserted – the Iranian Revolution was an impressive example of a people’s revolution – but simply to place this emphasis on homogeneity

(‘what struck me in Iran is that there is no struggle between different elements’; ‘we met, in Tehran and throughout Iran, the collective will of a people’<sup>67</sup>) in the wider context of what Foucault had already said about Oriental collectivities, be they Tunisian, Arab or Chinese. To a large extent, any self-awareness of his status as a traveller is absent from Foucault’s observations on Iran.

A final comment on the passage, emphasizing the latent Westernness of Foucault’s approach to an Islamic culture, concerns his description of ‘forms of life which have been immobile for a millennium’. Islam’s synonymy with the medieval – the Orient as a *topos* where time came to a halt somewhere near the end of the fifteenth century – has been a constant feature of all the writers considered up to now. Foucault more or less dates the ‘freezing’ of Iran’s institutions with the arrival of Islam in Persia – a concept of Islam, in other words, inherently resistant to change. It is worth reflecting, however, on Foucault’s choice of the word ‘immobile’, a term which has its own history in his writings; not simply because in an article published six weeks earlier Foucault already speaks of the ‘rigour [and] immobility of Islam’,<sup>68</sup> but rather because of a much earlier passage at the end of the preface to *The Order of Things*, in which he remarks:

In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western culture, I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws; and it is the same ground which is once more stirring beneath our feet.<sup>69</sup>

Foucault will never ask himself whether the immobility he discerns in the history of Iran, the thousand-year-old unchanging stasis he attributes without any reservation to the history of an ‘Eastern’ country, may not be as deceptive as the ‘apparent’ immobility he wishes to question in Western thought. The measure of suspicion necessary for such a step, the degree of scepticism required in order to restore an originary complexity to an ‘apparently’ straightforward and static culture, presupposes an acknowledgement of the *sophistication* of that culture – a quality that Foucault’s Islam does not appear to possess. In its essential structure the Iran of 1976 lies in the same time and place as that of 976; its rigour and immobility, far from being illusory, are fundamental. If the apparent immobility of Western culture hides a complex growth, a clandestine series of mutations and evolutions, an occult, multidimensional play of developments and instabilities, the immobility of Islam possesses no such depth, nor will it yield any paradoxical complications upon further investigation.

The point here is not to repeat familiar discussions of Foucault's alleged Eurocentrism or Orientalism (from Spivak, Said et al.<sup>70</sup>). It is, rather, to emphasize the surprising extent to which Foucault had already decided, in his remarks on Iran, what he was going to experience there. Foucault's perception of the mad energy of Iranians, the extra- (one might even say anti-) temporality of their gesture, the affirmative nature of their religion, the millennia-long immobility of their culture, the absolute homogeneity of their collectivity, are all perceptions whose epistemological conditions lie not in what Foucault actually saw in Iran, but rather in what he had previously read in Nietzsche and seen in Tunisia before ever setting foot in Tehran. Unconsciously or not, the Islamic Orient Foucault finds in Iran is the same Islam we find in *The Antichrist* and *The Genealogy of Morals* – the same energy, the same affirmative rejection of modernity, the same subversion of Christo-European temporality, the same association with Greeks and Romans – an impression of Iran whose positivity was both preceded and coloured by the experience of Tunisia, ten years earlier.

We have spoken against the desire to 'judge' Foucault or label him 'Orientalist' – not because Foucault's treatment of Islam and Islamic cultures do not deserve such an adjective (they do) but because to label a series of texts in such a way does not really help us understand how such beliefs perpetuate themselves. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to feel some astonishment at the ease with which Foucault appears, for example, to be interested in Nietzsche's description of Mohammed as an Arab Plato primarily because *Nietzsche* said it, regardless of whether it may be a valid description or not. Said has already examined how self-referential the corpus of European Orientalism actually was – how writers such as Burton or Flaubert would draw on Galland or D'Herbelot to justify a remark or observation (a phenomenon he refers to as 'accumulative' Orientalism). Foucault's conviction of the Orient's immobility, untameable nature and essential homogeneity are all gestures which come straight out of the nineteenth century, out of a hegemonic European tradition of comment on the Orient; his linking of Khomeini's uprising with the French Revolution, moreover, is a gesture taken directly from Hegel.<sup>71</sup> When one considers Derrida's sidelining of Islam in his essay on world religions,<sup>72</sup> or Baudrillard's use of Oriental stereotypes in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Saddam the Carpet-seller, etc.), what begins to emerge is the extent to which thinkers of postmodernity, in their encounters with the world of Islam, appear to draw on the same

European vocabulary as their predecessors. That in attempting to write about the Other, we invariably end up writing about ourselves has become in itself a cliché of Orientalist studies. What remains remarkable is the manner in which one of the principal figures responsible for delineating and demonstrating this situation of epistemological finitude so visibly failed to escape it in his own work.

## Notes

1. Michel Foucault: *Dits et écrits: 1954–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, Gallimard, Paris, 1980, 4 volumes, vol. III, pp. 622–3. All citations from *Dits et écrits* are my own translation. I am indebted to Ferda Keskin of Bilgi University for allowing me to see the only French edition of this text I could find in Istanbul.
2. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 713.
3. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 708.
4. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 587 (1967).
5. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 592 (1978).
6. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. xxvi.
7. *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, p. 704.
8. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 161.
9. *The Order of Things*, p. 325.
10. *Dits et écrits*, vol. I, p. 161.
11. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 52.
12. *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991, p. 335.
13. *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, p. 670; vol. IV, p. 526.
14. 'Truth and Power', *Foucault Reader*, p. 62.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. VI/2, Berlin, 1968, p. 289. For more on Nietzsche's relationship to Islam, see my own article 'Nietzsche's Peace with Islam: My Enemy's Enemy is My Friend', *German Life and Letters*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2003.
16. *Dits et écrits*, vol. I, p. 161.
17. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 538 (1978).
18. 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', *Foucault Reader*, p. 76. See Nietzsche, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. V/1, p. 296.
19. David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 185.
20. *The Order of Things*, pp. 305–6.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
22. 'The Repressive Hypothesis', *Foucault Reader*, p. 327.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *The Order of Things*, p. 325.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 356, 358.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 356, 357, 354.
27. Gérard Fellous, 'Michel Foucault: "La philosophie 'structuraliste' permet de diagnostiquer ce qu'est aujourd'hui"', *La Presse de Tunis*, 12 April 1967, p. 3; cited in Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, p. 185.
28. The expression is found in a letter to Köselitz, 13 March 1881: 'Ask my old comrade Gersdorff whether he'd like to go with me to Tunisia for one or two years.... I want to live for a while among Muslims, in the places moreover where their faith is at its most devout; this way my eye and judgement for all things European will

- be sharpened'; in *Briefe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, 1975, vol. III/1, §68.
29. *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV, p. 59.
  30. Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, p. 188.
  31. See *Dits et écrits* vol. IV, pp. 56, 526.
  32. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 622.
  33. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 806.
  34. Cited in James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1993, p. 36.
  35. *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV, p. 527.
  36. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 670.
  37. *Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 79.
  38. *Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 80.
  39. *Ibid.*, vol. IV, pp. 80, 79.
  40. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 688.
  41. Craig Keating, 'Reflections on the Revolution in Iran: Foucault on Resistance', *Journal of European Studies* 27, 1997, p. 182.
  42. From the interview with Foucault by Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet, 'Iran: the Spirit of a World without Spirit', trans. Alan Sheridan, in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Politics, Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 211–24.
  43. See Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff on the Iranian Revolution, *Monthly Review*, February 1979, p. 22.
  44. *New Statesman*, 30 November 1979, p. 334; *Monthly Review*, February 1979, pp. 4, 12.
  45. Fred Halliday speaking on Azer Turks in Tabriz in 'Revolt of the largest minority', *New Statesman*, 14 December 1979, p. 929.
  46. 'Since the virtual pogrom launched by pro-Khomeini groups in August, there has been a gradual reappearance of socialist and secular organisations. (What encouragement have they had, even from the West's social democracies?)', *New Statesman*, 30 November 1979, p. 334.
  47. Cited in John L. Esposito, *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, Florida International University Press, Miami, 1990, p. 65.
  48. See Claude Van Engeland's article in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 11 December 1978.
  49. Esposito, *The Iranian Revolution*, p. 320.
  50. See David Drake, *Intellectuals and Politics in Postwar France*, Palgrave, London, 2002, p. 157.
  51. Some have suggested the influence of Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau's *L'Ange* (Grasset, Paris, 1976), an almost Gnostic examination of the idea of rebellion, drawing on Lacan, Lin Piao and early Christian thought. See in particular the chapter entitled 'Meditation sur le pari' pp. 55–68.
  52. See Ronald Teirsky, 'The French Left and the Third World', in Simon Serfaty, ed., *The Foreign Policies of the French Left*, Westview Press, Boulder CO, 1979, p. 74; Drake, *Intellectuals and Politics in Postwar France*, p. 156.
  53. Danielle Marx-Scourgas, *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel*, Penn State University Press, University Park PA, 2002, pp. 176, 188.
  54. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
  55. *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, p. 686.
  56. Cited in Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, p. 152.
  57. *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, p. 686.
  58. *Ibid.*
  59. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 680.
  60. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 716.
  61. Cited in 'The Birth of the Asylum' (from *Madness and Civilization*), in *Foucault Reader*, p. 143.
  62. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
  63. *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, pp. 688, 760.
  64. Kritzman, *Interviews and Other Writings*, p. 215.
  65. *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, p. 715.
  66. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 690.
  67. Kritzman, *Interviews and Other Writings*, pp. 216, 215.
  68. *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, p. 685.
  69. *The Order of Things*, p. xxvi.
  70. See Robert Young's *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, p. 397.
  71. In his 1831 *Philosophy of History*, Hegel repeatedly links 'Mahometan fanaticism' with Robespierre; see *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, Dover, New York, 1956, pp. 356–7.
  72. See Derrida's 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', trans. Samuel Weber, in Gianni Vattimo, ed., *Religion*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp. 1–77.

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