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become a common theme of the discourse on modernity in which Islam is perceived as 'other'. In Foucault's conceptual framework, the question of 'other', 'Orient' vis-à-vis 'we', West does not come into the foreground. He does not perceive the people of Iran and the Iranian revolution with the spectacles of 'other'. It is rather 'significant other' to use George Herbert Mead's phrase (see Kassim, 2005, p.132). In the wider context of his critique of Western modernity, Foucault's 'empathic' account of the Iranian revolution does overcome or rather makes the people of Iran or for that matter any other culture or nation to be perceived as 'other' obsolete. It marks a displacement of the Western modernity (Salvatore, 1997, p.450) and the Enlightenment project that began with Kant and other thinkers of the Enlightenment period and culminated in the serious crisis by creating fragmentation on ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic and national levels in the modern world (see Kassim, 2004, pp.111-113). Foucault's account of the Iranian revolution is not to be read as a futile exercise in the journalistic enterprise where Iran serves as "the inferior complement to the West, its opposite 'other', the bearer of negative qualities whereby West's own superiority is by contrast underscored and its rule legitimized"(Clark, 1997, p.8). Foucault's account of the Iranian revolution stands on its own.

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everyone) is brought into history, breathing into life" (Foucault, 1984, p.452). This subjectivity creates for Foucault a trans-dimensional space, in which the Iranian revolution is seen as a high point in the unfolding of modern political subjectivity though it has a religious dimension, but it manifests itself in political and social aspects. The Iranian revolution is different from other revolutions which countries in the Western cultures have encountered in their history. It does not have to follow the same formal structures of universal values which the Enlightenment project had envisioned. This implication is expressed explicitly by Foucault in his essay "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution": "There is going to be no more pursuit of formal structures with universal value" as it was the case with Kant, "but rather historical investigation into events that have led us to constitute and recognize ourselves as subjects of what we do, think and say" (Foucault, 1993, pp.23-24). In this way, Foucault's idea of revolution when one reads it in conjunction with his critique of the Enlightenment project, Western modernity and the notion of subjectivity come together that enables him to 'empathize' with the Iranian revolution as a genuine revolution in spite of its being Islamic and foreign to Western tradition and its cultural values. As a matter of fact, Foucault considers that for the people of Iran, the religion of Islam was "like the promise and guarantee of finding that would change their subjectivity" (Foucault, 1984, p.39/ see also Salvatore, 1997, p.151). In this way he is able to give a crucial contribution to the Western intellectual discourse on Islam. But from this, if one characterizes the Iranian revolution to be purely Islamic revolution, it would be too simple. The Iranian clergy could challenge and overthrow the Shah of Iran, but that had a great deal to do with the social classes and political leadership of other groups and entire segments of Iranian society. These social classes and various other political groups acted in the name of and under the leadership of an Islamic force, though the clergy denied any relevance of the other social forces in the process of bringing the Iranian revolution. When one considers from this perspective, the Iranian revolution for Foucault "was religious just as much as it was political" (Foucault, 2000, p.450) in bringing changes in the present society. Foucault was aware not only of the whole context of the Iranian revolution as an Islamic movement and its significance as a historical event in the Middle East, but also its impact on the entire Muslim world. This Islamic context finds its way in the discourse of Western modernity in spite of its being religious as against secular that came into prominence with the Enlightenment period. And since then it has

and Anderson, 2005, p.96). Yes, there is a contradiction, but in spite of its being so, Foucault transcends it by conceiving of a modernity in which there is no 'other' or 'alterity'. It is in this transcending the contradiction that we find the answer to our query: "What to make of Foucault's perceptions of the Iranian revolution? For Foucault, it is the Enlightenment project and Western modernity that have generated the 'other'. But by conceiving of modernity as an attitude of relating to reality, to presentness inhabited by 'we' humans, Foucault is able to perceive the Iranian revolution of the people — 'we' the humans, 'we' among 'them' and 'we' as against the 'other'; it is simply 'we', the humans and not the 'French' or 'Iranians', or the 'Westerners' or 'Orientals' and identify 'empathically, with those who bring uprising, individually and collectively, against the tyranny and oppression of the Shah. With the stroke of 'we' among 'them' Foucault transcends the seeming contradiction by conceiving of them as individuals and subjects without any distinction whatsoever. Thus Foucault finds the meaning of revolution in this Iranian movement, regardless of its being Iranian and Islamic, by relating it to the presentness and reality. "The question which seems to me to appear for the first time... is the question of the present, of contemporary moment.... For the philosopher it will no longer simply be the question of his belonging to a human community in general, but rather of his membership of a certain 'we'; a 'we' corresponding to a cultural ensemble of his own contemporaneity" (see Salvatore, 1997, p.149). Here the question of 'we' versus 'other', 'Occident'/ 'West' versus 'Orient'/'Middle East' even does not come up.

Thus Foucault, without invoking any tension between 'tradition' and modernity' by which generally the 'Orient'/'Middle East' and 'Occident'/'West' are characterized respectively and which since the Enlightenment period have become and still are an ongoing theme in discourse of modernity in Islam, ...attains it some salient passages a dense formulation of the revolt's meaning" (ibid). It is the uprising of the whole nation, collectively and individually, against a power that oppresses it. They inscribed their humiliations, their hatred for the regime (Foucault, 2000, p.450) and were risking their own lives against the threat of the Shah's army. From this perception of the Iranian revolution, Foucault comes to formulate and express it so vividly: "The essence of the Iranian revolution lies in the political will of the people of Iran" (p.452). It is possible only due to the subjectivity that brings the real transformation and change in the people. "People do revolt: That is a fact. And that is how the subjectivity (not that of great man, but that of

philosophical and political principles that forces one to think of creating a new model of modernity. The people of Iran were trying to create a society entirely based on a different edifice. They were not taking or imitating revolutionary foundation from the Western philosophies (p.75). Foucault saw that the Iranian revolution presented an alternative form of modernity. For Foucault, modernity is the 'attitude toward presentness and reality' and he embraced the Iranian revolution, because the people of Iran were relating to their present conditions and the reality they were faced with. For Foucault, Iranian revolution pushed and transgressed the limits of Western borders of rationality that he had hoped in his *Madness and Civilization* to enter not only in the realm of discourse but also in reality (p.99).

Foucault found such a transgressive power in the figure of Ayatullah Khomeini and the people of Iran who followed him, living dangerously and flirting with death, a site, where creativity originated that made it possible for the people of Iran to face 'the intense gaze'(p.80) of their overlords — the so-called the guardians of modernization with their authoritarian policies and old time dictatorship — and to overturn the existing political situation and social order by 'political spirituality'. It was a 'spiritual dimension in politics' that became the center of Foucault's interest in the Iranian revolution (p.90). It has given the Iranian movement a double register: unified collective will and a strong desire for a radical change in the society on the part of the people of Iran expressed politically. "But, as Foucault saw it, this double affirmation can only be based on traditions and institutions on the basis of which the perfectly unified collective will being constituted gave an 'irreducible' strength to the Iranian movement. The notion of 'irreducibility' had already become a crucial aspect of Foucault's theory of resistance articulated two years earlier in his work *History of Sexuality*" (p.85).

Thus, the people of Iran, as Foucault perceives it, were trying to create, whether successful or not, that which was an alternative to Western modernity. Foucault was indeed aware of the fact that the Iranian revolution was Islamic. Iran and its heritage is very much Islamic and most certainly its history belongs to the Orient/Middle East and to the Oriental/ Middle Eastern tradition and not to the West or Western tradition. This is evident in his raising the question "In this will to an Islamic government should we see reconciliation, contradiction, or a threshold of a novelty?"(Foucault, 1978, p.49/ Salvatore, 1997, p.151). As a matter of fact, he actually applauded the Islamic government as a break with the politics of modernity, whether liberal or socialist (Afary

foreign to Western traditions and outlooks and outside the narrative of Western modernity.

For Foucault Kant's reflective critic, in spite of its high hopes and great aspirations for a balanced and just world has resulted in the evils of industrial capitalism. Foucault called it "the harshest, the most savage, most selfish, most dishonest, oppressive society one could possibly imagine"(Afary and Anderson, 2005, p.185). This position of Foucault develops in his works on the notion of the 'other' that forms the backdrop for his perceptions of the Iranian revolution. The notion of 'other' occupies a central place that he came to radicalize in the role it plays in creating the domination and power by Western modernity (Young, 2001, pp.397-398). In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault had emphasized the way in which a society labeled someone as the 'other' to be excluded and silenced. Foucault sees, as Megill summarizes it, a conflict in history between the 'same' and the 'other'. Every 'same' needs the 'other' against which it defines itself, just as in Hegel, every 'master' needs a 'slave'. In *Madness and Civilization,* Foucault analyzes how society turns its attention to the insane and subjects them to the objectivity of the modern society. In the same way, it is crime in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* that finds itself under scrutiny and the criminals defined as 'other' are put in confinement and under surveillance. In *The Order of the Things*, Foucault analyzes not the mechanisms of exclusion, but the oppressive 'same' that has created for itself the modes of thought and discourse of Western modernity (Megill, 1987, p.192). Foucault comes to the conclusion that it is by mechanisms of order and exclusion that the (European) society has operated since the sixteenth century.

What Foucault perceives in the Iranian revolution is the reaction against this hegemony of the West and Western modernity in the hope of finding an alternative to it.

In contrast to Kant, who sees the origins of the Enlightenment project which is responsible for creating Western modernity and as a triumph of the human race and its confidence in the rationality of human beings, Foucault sees it as 'master narrative' of Western imperialism that constructs and controls its subjected 'other'(Said, 1978, p.5). The West, seen in this light is to be perceived, as Edward Said notes, as a "relation of power, domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony" (Clark, 1997, p.8).

Consequently, Foucault's objection was to the very principle of Western modernity (Afary and Anderson, 2005, p.76). According to Foucault, the Iranian revolution was a challenge to all Western

tutelage. "This interpretation of the status of Kant's question provided Foucault with the basis for outliving 'the attitude of modernity'" (ibid). Thus Foucault reads in Kant something of more solid and lasting value and this motivates his critique of Kant's notion of the Enlightenment and emerges into Foucault's notion of modernity as 'the attitude toward presentness and reality'.

It is at this juncture one finds that Foucault connects Kant's concept of revolution and his notion of Enlightenment with the concept of modernity. For Foucault, modernity is a particular mode of relation to the present. It is not simply a reflective mode of relation to the present, but is a permanent reactivation of an attitude towards reality (Foucault, 1993, p.11). The attitude of modernity lies in the will to 'herorize' the present — that is grasping it in what it is. According to Foucault' own description of his genealogical method, modernity is a 'history of present', a history that seeks to grasp the present as present and not to explain the past in terms of the present or interpret the present in terms of the future (Hiley, 1985, p.69). It is in light of the idea of revolution, when identified with the notion of Enlightenment, that one discerns the implications regarding what Foucault has to say in his writings and interviews on the Iranian revolution.

Foucault calls the 'Kantian revolution' the 'analytic of finitude' that has transformed man's finitude into a triumph of sorts (p.72). "The discovery of man's finitude — which makes possible the sciences of man — is not taken as a limit...." (ibid). But, according to Foucault, this sovereign position given to man is not a stable position. Man in his 'analytic of finitude' appears to be a strange empirico-transcendental doublet where in succession the transcendental repeats the empirical, ... (p.75). The only possible solution for getting off this endless cycle of going back and forth from man as the condition for the possibility of knowledge to man as himself, as the object in the empirical, is to delimit Kant's Enlightenment project which results in a 'limit attitude' and transgress it. Kant saw the achievement of Enlightenment in terms of maturity as the rule of self by self through reason, whereas "Foucault saw it in an attitude toward ourselves and the present which is an historical analysis of the limits that are imposed upon us and a transgression that opens the possibility of going beyond the limits"(pp.75-76). It is in the framework of Foucault's critique of Enlightenment and his notion of modernity that one needs to review and analyze his writings and interviews on the Iranian revolution, notwithstanding the fact that Iran, Islam and Iranian revolution are

of October and November of 1978 and are put together by Afary and
Anderson (see Afary and Anderson, 2005, pp.183-277). They are taken
by most of Foucault's readers very lightly as if they are simply journalistic
pieces of writing and somehow they reflect partly Foucault's naiveté and
partly not knowing enough about the Iranian revolution, Islam, Iran or
the Orient except what he was fed by the people in Iran during his two
short visits in the country. Therefore, one needs to explore the
implications of Foucault's perceptions of the Iranian revolution in light
of the following two specific contentions:

(i) Foucault's interpretation in particular of Kant's essay on "What is
Enlightenment," and his article "Kant on Enlightenment and
Revolution" that evolve into Foucault's notion of critique and modernity
and (ii) Foucault's other works such as *Madness and Civilization, Discipline
and Punish, The Order of Thing* etc., from which emerges the conflict
between the 'other' and the 'same' that becomes for him the basis for the
rejection of Western modernity. In Foucault's indirect engagement with
the Iranian revolution as they are reflected in his writings on it are
formed by concerns he developed in these two sources.

Hence, before one can analyze Foucault's perceptions of the Iranian
revolution, it is essential to clarify his views on Kant's article "What is
Enlightenment?," Kant's concept of revolution and Foucault's critique
of Western modernity that evolves from it and are reflected in his
writings on the Iranian revolution. We would here first elucidate the
notion of the enlightenment as Kant conceives of it and is taken up
further by Foucault. Foucault reads in Kant the thinker who transformed
philosophy into the critic of reason that makes one an autonomous
subject and releases one from the self incurred tutelage (Kant, 1990,
p.83). Foucault uses Kant's essay as a diagnostic of a particular historical
conjecture. He finds in Kant that thinking arises out of responding to his
historical situation in the present (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986, p.111).
According to Foucault, Kant was trying to connect his philosophical
thought with present conditions, and understand what it means to
belong to the present and how to relate to it. Kant was not attempting to
situate the present in terms of either an historical event to which it
belonged or in terms of its contributions to the future. He was looking
for a difference: "What difference does today introduce with respect to
yesterday?" (Hiley, 1985, p.69). The difference which Kant identified was
that the age of Enlightenment was a 'way out' or an escape from
immaturity. According to Foucault, the gist of Kant's questioning was to
reflect upon the role of critic of reason in escaping from the self incurred

The Iranian revolution that occurred in the year 1979 took everyone by surprise. It seemed to have sprung from nowhere. It was an overwhelming, intense, spontaneous and unpredictable phenomenon. This fact in itself makes it unique. Foucault offers a wider perspective on the Iranian revolution reflecting his own philosophical standpoint and critique of Western modernity. Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution are to be seen in this larger context. Foucault thought that all philosophical and political principles of Western modernity need to be rethought and the people of Iran were doing precisely that (Afary and Anderson, 2005, p.25). Foucault perceives in the Iranian revolution an alternative form of modernity to the Western mode of modernity.

Consequently, Foucault's perceptions of the Iranian revolution are different and his interpretation of it stands apart from the views of the scholars in Iranian Studies and Islamic Studies. To mention a few examples, Richard Dekmejian argues that the Iranian revolution of 1979 was a true revolution in the classical sense (Dekmejian, 1980, p.173); Aryeh Schmulevitz, on the other hand, considers it to be a repeat performance of the classic Iranian conflict that has been going on for one hundred years (Schmulevitz, 1979, p.35). Theda Scocpol describes it as thoroughly transformative of socio-cultural and socio-economic relationships in Iran (Scocpol, 1982, p.11:267). Richard Falk speculates that Iran may yet surprise us with a desperately needed model of human governance for a Third World country (Falk, 1979, p.A-17). There are other authors who plunge directly into the hypothesis that the Iranian revolution symbolizes the political Islam (Benard and Khalizad, 1984, p.19) and thus they conceive of Iran as the 'other' and the Iranian revolution as the manifestation of 'alterity' to the civilized world of the West.

But, I will argue that Foucault's perceptions of Iranian revolution are completely bereft of these views. He analyzes it from the point of view of a wider context of modernity regardless of its being different from Western modernity. Therefore, his perceptions of the Iranian revolution do not merely reflect his 'empathy' for it, but a genuine expression of his thought and conviction, though it might seem at first sight that his remarks on it need not to be taken too seriously. Most probably that is the reason why the literature is filled with various interpretations of his works, their critical analysis and further constructions on the different aspects of his thought, but one does not find any serious discussion in his articles and interviews on the Iranian revolution that were published in the *Carriere dlla sera*, *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* in the months

What to Make of Michel Foucault's Perceptions of the Iranian Revolution

Husain Kassim *

Abstract

This article revisits Foucault's articles and interviews on the Iranian revolution. It reviews them in light of the following two contentions:

(i) Foucault's interpretation of Kant's essay on "What is Enlightenment?" and his article "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution" that evolve into Foucault's notions of critique and modernity and in conjunction with this, (ii) his other works such as Madness and Civilization, Discipline and Punish, The Order of Things etc. that lead Foucault to the idea that Western modernity generates a conflict between the 'other' and the 'same'. This becomes the basis for him to reject Western modernity and embrace the Iranian revolution as an alternative to Western modernity. These ideas are very much implicit in Foucault's indirect engagement with the Iranian revolution. They become more evident in Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution, though his account of it seems to stand outside the narrative of Western modernity. Whether Foucault is right or wrong in his perceptions of the Iranian revolution is altogether a different question.

Keywords: *Foucault, Iranian revolution, critique, enlightenment, Western modernity.*

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