

# Of Gods and Kings: The Authority and Formation of the State in *A Thousand Plateaus*

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The situation in Iran can be understood as a great joust under traditional emblems, those of the king and the saint, the armed ruler and the destitute exile, the despot faced with the man who stands up bare-handed and is acclaimed by a people. This image has its own power, but it also speaks to a reality to which millions of dead have just subscribed. – Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

Throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (hereafter D&G) continuously refer to two figures of power they develop in the chapter “On Several Regimes of Signs,” the “despot-god” and “interpretive priest.” Yet, when they get to the “Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine,” D&G have abandoned these constructs in favor of Georges Dumézil’s “magician-king” and “jurist-priest.” Why make this shift and what can it tell us in its application?

This paper attempt to accomplish three tasks. First, to connect those two accounts, demonstrating that Dumézil’s categories function as sources of authority from which the corresponding D&G entity derives its method of exerting power providing a more holistic account of their thesis on regime structure. Second, to illustrate this connection using the two competing powers at the heart of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran – the magician-king/despot-god Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the jurist-priest/interpretive priest Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Finally, to demonstrate how this Deleuzian account provides for a better explanation of 1979 and its aftermath than the prevailing narratives of the Revolution.

## 1. *God’s Law & Law’s God*

Zarathustra asked Ahura-Mazda: Ahura-Mazda, the Heavenly, the Holy, Creator of the corporeal world, the Pure! With whom, first of mankind, hast thou taught the law which is derived from Ahura, the Zarathustrian? – Fargard II, *Avesta*<sup>2</sup>

In “On Several Regimes of Signs,” D&G offer an account for the “form of expression” of semiotic systems. However, they immediately identify that these regimes are not limited to linguistics but actually account for the form of various if not all social constructs.<sup>3</sup> This enables D&G to steer their conversation to the topic of the state and its structure when defining the *signifying regime*.<sup>4</sup> The nomadology chapter is entirely focused on the nature of the state and the externality of the war machine. That there is connective tissue between these chapters is beyond question but how they interact on specifics is less clear. Certainly, the signifying regime is the state and the *countersignifying* corresponds to the nomadic. But how do we reconcile the account of the apparatus of the state and the nomadic war machine with the regimes of signs?

What D&G borrow from Dumézil (magician-king and jurist-priest) are two types of sovereignty with names that are conspicuously similar to the two figures of the signifying regime (despot-god and interpretive priest). Yet, while similar the names remain different as are their

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Are the Iranians Dreaming [Rêvent] About?,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 204.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur H. Bleeker, *Avesta: The Religious Books of the Parsees, From Professor Spiegel’s German Translation of the Original Manuscripts* (Hertford: Muncherjee Hormusjee Cama, (1864), reprint, Lexington, KY: Elibron Classics, 2005), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 111.

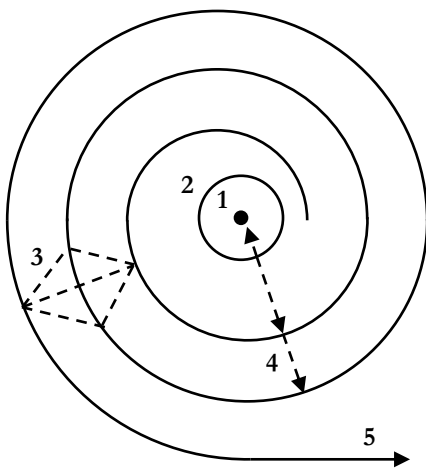
<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

topographical descriptions. Additionally, Dumézil and his theories do not appear at all in the regimes of signs chapter.

Dumézil’s categories offer an explanation of how sovereign’s source their authority. Meanwhile, D&G’s signifying regime explains the functional method of the state and its central power figures. Yet, neither Dumézil’s nor D&G’s categories exist as mutually exclusive options. As such, a one-to-one correlation at the expense of the other grouping for state forms is not sufficient. Rather, both pairings exist in all states. What distinguishes between types is a matter of their presence or embodiment within the state apparatus. In other words, the type of sovereign authority and with it the operative mechanism of the state is dependent upon the faciality of the central despotic figure.

D&G’s topography of the signifying regimes begins with the outside as that is the site of the interplay of signs. On their own, the systems of signs operate entirely self-referentially – one signifier refers to another which in turn refers to a third and so on until the chain loops back on itself.<sup>5</sup> These circles (depicted as an expanding spiral)<sup>6</sup> overlap and intersect with one another and expand both in scale and number.<sup>7</sup> However, the underlying logic remains just as fallacious, ungrounded, and untenable.

To overcome the circular logic, an attempt is made to construct a stasis point. A central



1. **Despot-God**
2. **Interpretive Priest**
3. **Signs referring to other signs in the same or other circles**
4. **Interpretive development of the signifier into signified, which then reimparts the signifier**
5. **Line of Flight**

figure serves as a tether akin to the black holes D&G discuss in “Micropolitics and Segmentarity” that allows for the circles to resonate together.<sup>8</sup> Disconnected from the circles, this focal point provides a site of knowability without self-reference but through a common understanding. In turn, while this does not provide a non-self-referential basis for any given circle, it provides an external validation that enables the system’s functioning.<sup>9</sup> However, as the validation is determined by this figure’s separation from the concentric circles, it cannot continuously engage with these networks. Any signification or meaning offered by this figure must pass through an interpretive medium – a ring – that bridges the gap between the figure and the concentric circles. D&G name the central figure and the mediating ring the despotic god and interpretive priest, respectively.<sup>10</sup>

In the structure of the state, the legitimacy of the apparatus is premised upon the validity of the sovereign. The ruler is not only the embodiment of the state as figurehead but the source from which the state’s power emanates. Any decree is offered by the despotic-god or in their name as no other source has a legitimate claim, caught as they are within the same circles as all others.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 112.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 113-4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 114-5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 114.

However, the ruling “in the name of” is a central element to state operation. No sovereign can be in all places to adjudicate all matters or offer decrees applicable to all situations. Instead, the despot-god depends upon proxies to operate on their behalf. These bureaucratic operatives interpret the despot-god’s will to apply it as needed.<sup>12</sup> The king calls for the formation of a government upon which he grants the authority for the creation of laws, God’s message is shared with the congregation through the explication offered by the priest’s sermon, the dictionary as references with the legitimacy of its source give credence to the circular chain of definitions contained within its pages.

As with any mediation, the potential exists for deception. The proxy may act contrary to their sovereign’s decree either intentionally or mistakenly.<sup>13</sup> The separation, both pragmatic and essential between the despot-god and the radiating circles can render the ruler oblivious to the manipulations of their interpretive priests. A king who fails to survey their lands or hold court does not know of what the judges and lords do in their name. The silent or absent god cedes the message to the preacher to decipher at their whim. It is this interplay of power and authority that opens the mechanics of the signifying regime to the dualism of Dumézil’s sovereigns.

Georges Dumézil was a French philologist focused on studying ancient Indo-European myths and religions for insight into their cultural origins. For his predecessors, such as Martin Haug and Baron Christian von Bunsen,<sup>14</sup> this work typically reflected an attempt to derive a common source for the development of civilization centered on the Aryans. While maintaining the hypothesis of a common Indo-European culture and ideology, Dumézil distinguished himself from these thinkers by discounting a theory of cultural universalism.<sup>15</sup> Focusing only on Indo-European as an individual and distinct civilization amongst many others, Dumézil developed a theory for its common ideology that was reinforced in their language, philosophies, religions and myths, and so on.<sup>16</sup> The appeal of such a theory to D&G should be apparent as it promotes a common reinforcement structure between the various social constructs like language and government which mirrors that of the regimes of signs. Even better, both theories focus on the “functional” interactions of these systems. Yet, it is not with reference to the regimes of signs that D&G turn to Dumézil.

In contrast with those past philologists and others like Joseph Campbell’s Jungian psychological approach, Dumézil focused not on a universalist theorization but a contextual analysis of ancient myths and religions.<sup>17</sup> By analyzing common traits, Dumézil mirrors the linguistic approach attempting to identify a common original belief structure. Dumézil concluded that this system’s “ideology” was characterized by a tripartite functional mechanism – *trifunctionalism* – which was reflected within societal organization and passed down to successive cultures.<sup>18</sup> The three social “castes” consisted of the sovereign, the warrior, and the productive.

It is this tripartite separation that D&G borrow as it enables them to affirm the distinction between the sovereign political power of the state apparatus from the warrior caste they identify as the nomadic war machine. Dumézil’s theorization of the sovereign caste (our primary interest here)

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<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 114.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Marchand, “Dating Zarathustra: Oriental Texts and the Problem of Persian Prehistory, 1700-1900” *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* 1 (2016), 235-7.

<sup>15</sup> Alain de Benoist, “Priests, Warriors, and Cultivators: An Interview with Georges Dumézil,” in *Tyr: Myth-Culture-Tradition Volume 1*, ed. Joshua Buckley, Collin Cleary, and Michael Moynihan (Atlanta, GA: Ultra, 2002), 41-2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

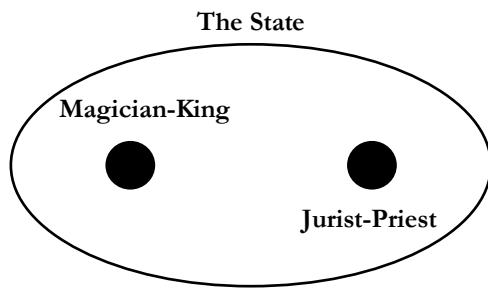
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-2.

identifies two types of leadership figures – the magician-king and the jurist-priest. In his book *Mitra-Varuna*, Dumézil tracks this bipartite separation of sovereignty through several Indo-European traditions.<sup>19</sup> His description of the two types in Norse mythology provides probably the most direct and explicit demonstration of Dumézil’s thesis – both illustrating the categories and their relationships. (The Norse example also happens to be the one to which D&G themselves refer in the “Apparatus of Capture.”)<sup>20</sup>

The magician-king is represented by the figure of Odin, the one-eyed god. The story of the loss of Odin’s eye is lost to us though variations remain, all of which tie Odin to *Mímr* which represents a source of knowledge. Thus, Odin’s lost eye is meant to be a constant allusion to his innate wisdom.<sup>21</sup> Fittingly, Odin’s mutilation marks his face, the essential portrayal element of D&G’s despot-god.<sup>22</sup> From his wisdom, Odin has his right and ability to rule. The power emanates from within, linked inexorably to the ruler himself “empowering the god to perform his magician’s function.”<sup>23</sup>

Another mutilated mythological figure represents the jurist-priest within the Norse canon – the tale of the lost hand of Tyr. The wolf, Fenrir, is unable to be restrained by the gods. Odin turns to the Black Elves to forge his invention of a magic chain that will only become more binding as the wolf resists. However, Fenrir is suspicious of a trick and the gods fail to lure him into his restraints. Instead, they offer Fenrir a deal which would secure him his freedom from the god’s attempts to capture him if he submits to be bound and “tested” by this magical chain. To protect against any deceit, Fenrir requires one god to offer their hand for him to bite if the deal is not honest. Once restrained the ruse becomes clear. Tyr, who had offered his hand, could have saved himself given Fenrir’s bound status. However, Tyr’s commitment to the deal led him to make good on his sacrifice. This fidelity to the agreement, of the lawyer god to the law, turns the fraud into a legal pact; his lost hand is a testament to this commitment.<sup>24</sup>

The magician-king finds the right to rule from their innate characteristics – typically centered on their wisdom which imbues the mythological figure with extra powers that often enable their role in creation. The jurist-priest finds their sovereign claim in their fidelity to an external source – usually the law or some other moral organizing mechanism. However, these are not mutually



exclusive structures. After all, Dumézil finds both of these archetypes within each Indo-European mythological tradition – the Norse have both Odin and Tyr. Instead, the magician-king and the jurist-priest serve as two poles of authority. This is not to organize them as the ends of a spectrum but rather two faces that are always present within a culture’s (at least those of Indo-European descent) ideological construction of sovereign authority.

<sup>19</sup> Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 17-20.

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 424-6.

<sup>21</sup> Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 139-40.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 115-6.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 140.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-2.

How do these different structures – the signifying regime and the bipartite sovereign – conjoin? Dumézil provides a source of authority for a sovereign's reign. The type of authority determines the corresponding method of rule. The magician-king's innate qualities legitimizes their ability to rule not through the external referent of another but in their own name as a despot-god. The jurist-priest's external validity in their commitment to the outside legitimate authority – the rule of law – requires a capacity for adaptability in its application necessitating the functionality of the interpretive priest.

However, a simple one-to-one correlation is not sufficient as all governments have both elements. Who then has power? Who is the leader of a state? Here, there is as much variance as there are different state constitutions. Broadly, however, there can be three identifiable categories.

First, is the classical structure that explicitly corresponds to the D&G's signifying regime. A despot-god ruler claims the right to rule via some inherent quality (such as Divine Right or the Mandate of Heaven). The despot-god serves as the head of state and government – the central figure around which society is structured. The ministers (interpretive priests) apply the king's decrees via the external validation of their right to make these determinations (their proximity to the king and right to speak in their place). This structure contains a heavy emphasis on the despot-god's embodiment of their role as all authority (their own and the external validation of the interpretive priests) emanate from them. Thus, the despot-god as an individual must be omnipresent. In D&G's terms, their face as the reterritorializing signifier must always be seen:

The despot-god has never hidden his face, far from it: he makes himself one, or even several. The mask does not hide the face, it *is* the face. The priest administers the face of the god. With the despot, everything is public, and everything that is public is so by virtue of the face. Lies and deception may be a fundamental part of the signifying regime, but secrecy is not.<sup>25</sup>

The second structure begins the process of disconnecting the face or embodiment of the state apparatus from the individual – the personage of the king. The form of this process has more variation as it encompasses a potentially transitional middle phase. However, examples showing the expanse of the spectrum can offer clarity. On one end, is the ceremonial figurehead king. Here the partition between the state and government gains significance. The despot-god maintains their role as head of state allowing the presentational role – the public facing which lends authority. However, the actual administrative role – the government – comes under the purview of the interpretive priests. When D&G speak of the deceit of the priests' interpretations,<sup>26</sup> this stage marks the beginning of a usurpation of power where legitimacy may emanate from the despot-god but increasingly the laws are constructed and not merely interpreted by the priests.

On the other end, the despot-god embodied within an individual has become even more absent as the source of authority. The imperial president functions chiefly as the head of government but also fills the ceremonial head of state role as the international representative of the nation. However, this latter role becomes increasingly perfunctory and less as the tethering stasis point that is the function of the despot-god in the signifying regime. Rather, this role is taken on by inanimate signifiers of the state. Instead of the will of the king as the basis of law, both in name and as the premise to be extrapolated, the despot-god role is adopted by disembodied elements. In the legal context, this role is filled by a governing document, a written constitution, to which a public devotion becomes increasingly significant. The despot-god's role is replaced by historical figures (the founding fathers) and patriotic symbols (pledges, anthems, and iconography). Legal documents take

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<sup>25</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 115.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

on an ethereal role independent of any individual political figure. Authority both for government and state emanates from the constitution and the patriotic legacy from which it was derived. The actual practice of rule is almost entirely taken on by the bureaucracy. Even the president's governing role is more interpretive priest than despot-god as their authority is granted by their constitutional role and enforcement of such rather than from any inherent trait. These elevated symbols and documents become the face of the state on par or exceeding any given leadership figures – one rallies around the flag and not the king.

In the third and final structure, the disembodiment of the despot-god becomes complete. No individual claims the role of the despot-god; instead it becomes entirely referential, an absent signifier – a pure mask as face. All law is proclaimed as already existent and thus the law itself rather than the lawmaker takes on the facing role of the despot-god. The only political figures are the interpretive priests who administer this law as its most devoted students.

While we have identified three distinct structures, it is important to note that they all operate within the same overarching schema. The sources of authority remain the same Dumézilian identified constructs of Indo-European historical legacy. The methods of state operation continue as D&G's signifying regime. The variability is determined by which roles are filled by whom thus engaging in the performative functions of the state.

## 2. *The King and the Saint*

At the dawn of history, Persia invented the state and conferred its models on Islam. Its administrators staffed the caliphate. But from this same Islam, it derived a religion that gave to its people infinite resources to resist state power. In this will for an "Islamic government," should one see a reconciliation, a contradiction, or the threshold of something new? – Michel Foucault<sup>27</sup>

From the kings of old to modern authoritarian regimes, these governments organized themselves around the despotic figure whether by divine mandate or a cult of personality. The conventional paranoid despotic regime is easily familiar. The spectrum of the second category largely envelops the modern age, particularly the West. On the one side are those regimes with the vestiges of monarchy, the royal family with their ceremonial roles that remain formally significant but in practice are more parodic. On the other extreme is the constitutional republic with its imperial president where the head of state and government conjoin as the representative of the nation, but authority is derived from outside their personage.

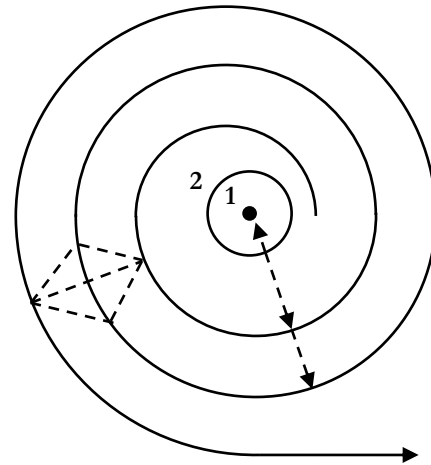
The third category is less common and harder to discern, especially as it requires an intense interrogation of the ideological structure of a state to distinguish the perfunctory symbolism of the sovereign from their type. Here, the case of the Iranian Revolution may provide an illuminating example with its contest between the Pahlavi Shah as magician-king/despot-god and Ayatollah Khomeini as jurist-priest/interpretive priest.

The Shah exemplified the despotic regime. For all the modernizing influence he advocated for socially, economically, and so on, his regime maintained the archaic structure. His title, for example, exemplified this classical political structure – His Imperial Majesty – seeking to evoke some innate greatness allowing his role as Shah to elevate him beyond others. However, his more unique titles take this even further, beyond a political designation of an imperial king.

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Are the Iranians Dreaming [Rêvent] About?," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 208.

*Shahanshab* was a title used by Persian rulers throughout history to draw a connection to the ancient Achaemenid dynasty. Translated, this title means “King of Kings,” elevating the status of the Shah beyond any other despotic ruler. But the attempt to connect himself to the ancient empire was a persistent political effort to maintain the symbolic legitimacy of his dynasty’s rule. This was crucial as he was only the second of his direct line both of whom relied heavily on foreign support for their rise to power. The first Pahlavi Shah’s Cossack Brigade usurped the Qajar Dynasty with British assistance. The second rose following the coup d’etat that overthrew Prime Minister Mossadegh which led to the son replacing his exiled father at the behest of the United States.



1. **Shah (HIM, *Shahanshab*, *Aryamehr*)**
2. **Ministers, Parliament, and the rest of the state bureaucracy**

To connect the Pahlavi dynasty to the Achaemenids, the Shah engaged in several propaganda campaigns. First, was the continuation of his father’s modernization of the education system which created national education standards.<sup>28</sup> With this standardization came the official historical narrative focused on the continual independent and monarchical legacy of Iran running from the ancient empire to the modern day.<sup>29</sup> This was done to legitimize the Pahlavi’s inherent rule both in attempting to grant them a historical legacy but also to distinguish them from and discredit alternative forms of authority that may challenge their right to rule. Directly, the Pahlavi’s sought to challenge the historical interferences with the monarchical tradition that came with the spread of Islam and the conquest of the Arabic caliphates. To counter this historical detail, emphasis was made on the “Iranising” of the Islamic empires’ administrative states.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the narrative emphasized a detachment of the Persian people from the caliphate as they awaited the return of the rightful Iranian regime.<sup>31</sup> To solidify this connection, in 1971 the Shah hosted the Celebration of the 2,500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire. The narrative of the monarchical continuation attempted to portray the Shah as the inheritor of the legacy of Cyrus the Great.<sup>32</sup>

The connection went deeper than just the continuation of a political tradition. Along with the monarchical legacy, immutable to outside influence was the construction of a stable Persian ethnic identity rooted in European orientalist narratives – the Aryans.<sup>33</sup> Another title the Shah adopted was *Aryamehr* (“Light of the Aryans”), a call to the pre-Islamic identity distinct from their Semitic Arab neighbors. As the embodiment of the light, the Shah claimed authoritative rights over the Iranian people – so named as the Persian variation of the term “Aryan.” (However, this Aryan-

<sup>28</sup> Haggay Ram, “The Immemorial Iranian Nation? School Textbooks and Historical Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no.1 (2000), 70.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

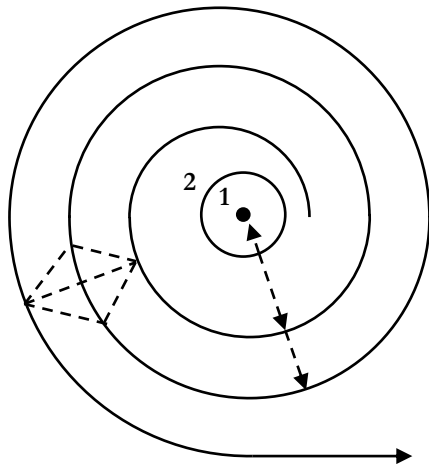
<sup>32</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, NJ: Yale UP, 2017), 664-5.

<sup>33</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, NJ: Yale UP, 2017), 665.; Michel Foucault, “The Shah is a Hundred Years Behind the Times,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 196.

Iranian linguistic connection, while still believed by many marking the success of the education system's instillation of the idea, has been rejected as historically inaccurate.)<sup>34</sup>

The Shah's authority as internally derived reflects his role as the magician-king. That all laws and the formation of government flow from him shows his functional role as despot-god. Various elements demonstrate this: the paranoia surrounding threats to his legitimacy and the use of the SAVAK to counter these imagined challenges such as with Ali Shariati.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the best example is the rise of the Shah specifically against the fall of Mossadegh who marked a step, albeit one that was always doomed to fail, towards the second type of governmental structure. The Shah instead maintained direct authority and government functions all had their legitimacy stem from his imperial rule. Ministers of parliament, judges, and so on were the despot-god's bureaucratic interpretive priests applying laws on the Shah's behalf.

The 1979 Revolution was a radical shift from the first to the third type of government structure. The Islamic Republic operates as the third type as Ayatollah Khomeini organized his government not based upon his innate right to rulership but upon his role as a jurist-priest. Khomeini's government was based on his development of a theological concept called the *Vilayat-i Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist).



1. Allah, Mohammad, the Mahdi, Quran, & Hadith
2. *Fuqaha*, Supreme Leader, & Guardian Council

Khomeini's *Islamic Government* advocates for an Islamic liberation theology to free the Muslim world from the West's imperial and colonial exploitation. His book does this in two ways, first, in the justification for the creation of an Islamic state and, second, in the formulation of its functional mechanism.

The mandate for the construction of an Islamic state arises from the theological tradition. This is essential for Khomeini as it not only grants the right for the organization of a state but in his reading constitutes a religious mandate upon the clerical class (*fuqaha*) – thus a power emanating distinct from the interpretive priests that serves as their call to action. Indeed, Khomeini sources all his arguments back to the Quran or the Hadiths as he can only function as an interpreter of the scriptural authority.

The references Khomeini uses for the mandate for Islamic government can be sorted into two categories. First, are the historical examples of the creation of a state that he contends serve as models upon which the Muslim

world must emulate.<sup>36</sup> Thus, when Mohammad and the Imams formed the caliphate as a response to the mandate of Allah, that charge did not expire with the Mahdi's Second Occultation in the Shi'a tradition. The second category includes the textual evidence which calls for the state. This itself takes two main forms. First, the necessity of the state as a protectorate of the Islamic world.<sup>37</sup> Second, the legalistic nature of the tradition demonstrates the necessity of Islamic government as the lack of a

<sup>34</sup> Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), 78.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond William Baker, *Justice in Islam: The Quest for the Righteous Community from Abu Dharr to Muhammad Ali* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2022), 181.

<sup>36</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government," in ed. and trans. Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)* (North Haledon, NJ: Mizan Press, 1981), 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-9.

state would render much of the texts functionally irrelevant.<sup>38</sup> Khomeini's call for the formation of Islamic government is not really *his*, merely his identification of the necessity of its creation from the demand he discerns in the external source of the texts and traditions of Islam. Like Tyr, it is the law, or in this case the faith, that demands the formation of the state and Khomeini is merely the one maintaining his commitment to that obligation.

The apparatus of the state reflects this authoritative form. As Khomeini's identification of the necessity for a state arises from his role as jurist-priest, the operative functioning of the state occurs through the interpretive priests. The *vilayat-i faqih*, is similarly rooted in the Islamic tradition. However, Khomeini makes significant theological alterations to its historical reading to reimagine the formation of the state. This again reflects the authority type that Khomeini is appealing to in his effort to legitimize his endeavor. As jurist-priest, he is sourcing the *vilayat* from within the tradition and merely *interprets* it in a novel way. However, he does this solely to satisfy the obligation already determined with the necessity of Islamic government.

The problem Khomeini faced with forming an Islamic state based on his religious tradition is the need to overcome the problem of the Mahdi. All the legitimate Islamic caliphates in the Shi'a tradition were ruled by living Imams. However, Iranian Twelver Shi'ism has no present Imam as the Twelfth Imam (the Mahdi) went into his Second Occultation in 941 C.E. Thus, the models for a state based on this tradition have no possible correlation to a modern formulation. In Deleuzian terms, there is no magician-king/despot-god figure who can serve in the central role of the signifying regime – the Mahdi lacks a face.

Khomeini finds an end around in the *maqbulah* of 'Umar ibn Hanzala. When 'Umar asked the Imam about going to the political offices (ruler or judge) for recourse over a disagreement between two Muslims, the Imam declares any such verdict illegitimate, as *taghut* (the powers that Allah commands one to reject).

'Umar ibn Hanzala then asked: "What should two Shi'is do then, under such circumstances?" Imam Sadiq answered: "They must seek out one of you who narrates our traditions, who is versed in what is permissible and what is forbidden, who is well acquainted with our laws and ordinances, and accept him as judge and arbiter, for I appoint him as judge over you."<sup>39</sup>

From this seemingly innocuous call to pragmatism, Khomeini derived a theory of statehood. The authority of the clerical class arises from the appointment by the Imam of the knowers of Islam as judge and arbiter – the interpretive priest applying the decrees of Islam.

Rather than ruled by a caliph or Imam, the Islamic Republic displaces the entity of the despot-god literally onto god, Allah, and the decrees mandated by him in the form of the texts and traditions of Islam. The ruling class of the Islamic Republic does not make laws but merely interprets and applies them fulfilling the function of the jurist-priest for an otherwise absent despot-god. In fact, Khomeini makes this explicit:

The fundamental difference between Islamic government, on the one hand, and constitutional monarchies and republics on the other, is this: whereas the representatives of the people or the monarch in such regimes engage in legislation, in Islam the legislative power and competence to establish laws belongs exclusively to God Almighty. The Sacred Legislator of Islam is the sole

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<sup>38</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government," in ed. and trans. Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)* (North Haledon, NJ: Mizan Press, 1981), 43-4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

legislative power. No one has the right to legislate and no law may be executed except the law of the Divine Legislator.<sup>40</sup>

The role of the *faqih* (jurist) is merely to interpret and apply the laws of the Divine Legislator and this is the position Khomeini intended to occupy. This role is explicitly distinguished from that of the Imams or the Prophet<sup>41</sup> – just as the separation between the prophet and priest is articulated by D&G.<sup>42</sup> For both, the prophet speaks not in their own voice but as merely an instrument of god without interpretive function. However, the priest is an individual that may intentionally or not act deceitfully and misrepresent the legislative intent of the despot-god.

In contrast to the Shah's regime, the *vilayat* has no living figure to occupy the space of the magician-king/despot-god. The face of the regime (in theory at least) is meant to be embodied in Allah and the scriptures which reflect his will through the conduit of the prophets. Khomeini's legitimacy was entirely dependent upon the scriptural authority he was granted through his interpretation of the texts and traditions which in turn also served as the sole source material through which his government could function. The power of the jurist-priest is found outside of themselves and its only through their knowledge and commitment towards that external power that they have any sovereign authority and thus the enactment of that power is dependent on their ability to apply that source material to a given context.

### 3. *No Difference, Just Repetition*

It is all the same to me if this strategist is a politician, a historian, a revolutionary, or a partisan of the shah or of the ayatollah, for my theoretical ethics are on the opposite side. My ethics are "antistrategic." One must be respectful when a singularity arises and intransigent as soon as the state violates universals. It is a simple choice, but hard work: one needs to watch, a bit underneath history, for what breaks and agitates it, and keep watch, a bit behind politics, over what must unconditionally limit it. After all, this is my work. I am neither the first nor the only one to do it, but I chose it. – Michel Foucault<sup>43</sup>

What is to be learned from this correlative analysis of D&G's and Duménil's concepts, especially given that *A Thousand Plateaus* already engages with the magician-king and jurist-priest? Other than offering a potential heuristic for comparative politics, the Iran case also demonstrates this work's capacity to discern and even predict the nature of social and political movements. In the aftermath of 1979, there are three primary narratives of the Revolution: that it was a successful transformative movement, that it had transformative potential but failed, or that it was never transformative at all.

Naturally, the first category consists largely of those in favor the regime. However, the ideological commitment to the Revolution has fluctuated over time. The 2009 Green Movement marked a pivotal point in which the illusion many supporters had of the transformative nature of the Islamic Republic broke.<sup>44</sup> For a variety of reasons, many supporters even within the government began to question the legitimacy of the state. At the heart of this challenge was the religious issue both in content and in form.

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<sup>40</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government," in ed. and trans. Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)* (North Haledon, NJ: Mizan Press, 1981), 55.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-1.

<sup>42</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 124.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault, "Is it Useless to Revolt?," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 267.

<sup>44</sup> Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2019), 48-9.

The continuous religious allusions immediately made identifiable any state-issued propaganda. As such, theological sourcing had begun to collapse in its ability to offer authoritative legitimacy to the regime. It should be no surprise then that following 2009 the state began to shift its messaging strategy away from Islam and rather towards more “conventional” symbolism.<sup>45</sup>

State propaganda began to pump out nationalistic messaging. Examples include museums focusing on the Islamic Republic’s capacity to protect and preserve the state’s territorial integrity<sup>46</sup> and the creation of rap songs and accompanying music videos that promote the same narrative, despite being a medium previously rejected and policed by the regime.<sup>47</sup> The reorientation from the theological to the nationalistic also reveals the potential strategic blunder of the assassination of Qassim Soleimani who was a central figure in this rebranding campaign.<sup>48</sup> Soleimani’s death has been used to promote a martyrdom of the national hero narrative that led many to rally back towards the regime and continues to do so with symbolic reminders offered by the state.<sup>49</sup>

Those that reject the Revolution as not transformative at all largely belong to the extreme opposition to the regime – the monarchists who saw only a usurpation of power, a shifting of hands. Depending on how we define “transformative” we can say that this group is right or wrong. Certainly, there was a shift in the form of the state, but still within the category of the signifying regime.

This distinction becomes much more interesting with the final category – those that saw the Revolution as full of potential that was never realized. Within this are two groups. The most prominent is the narrative of the “lost revolution,” the fantasy of most leftists who believed that Khomeini coopted their movement.<sup>50</sup> This story remains pervasive, partially as it was promoted by the Shah in the form of his labeling the movement as communist to delegitimize in the eyes of a largely anti-communist population. However, many at the time and since reject this framing as these political operatives never had popular support without the religious element which was itself oppositional to the leftist agenda.<sup>51</sup>

More intriguing is the group who believed in the potential of the religious element of the Revolution but were ultimately disillusioned with its manifestation. The exemplar of this, as alluded to with the opening quotes was Michel Foucault. For Foucault, the Revolution marked a singularity that he understood to be a radical break from the legacy of Western political philosophy. Islamic government as “political spirituality” was meant to fundamentally reconstruct politics offering an escape from the Cold War dualism of capitalism versus communism.<sup>52</sup>

What this Deleuzian analysis offers is an identification of where exactly Foucault’s analysis went wrong. While the shift from the role of the magician-king/despot-god as an individual to literally god as represented in a theological tradition marked a movement away from the Shah’s political structure, this does not make the Revolution the singularity the Foucault imagined it to have been. Indeed, what Dumézil and D&G show is that the shift to jurist-priest/interpretive priest remains firmly within the same ideological tradition from which Foucault was seeking to escape. The

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<sup>45</sup> Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2019), 116-7.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-12.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Beaumont, “Making of a Martyr: How Qassem Suleimani Was Hunted Down,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/05/making-of-a-martyr-how-qassem-suleimani-was-hunted-down>.

<sup>50</sup> Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 105.

<sup>51</sup> Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, “Thinking the Unthinkable: The Revolutionary Movement in Iran,” in *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 19-54.

<sup>52</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Are the Iranians Dreaming [Rêvent] About?,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 209.

antipolitical transformative role of Khomeini in Foucault's eyes clearly falls when examining the bureaucratic nature of the interpretive priest. The reorientation of the central tether held by the despot-god from a person to a legal tradition, even or especially a theological one, in no way fundamentally transforms the topographical structure of the state apparatus. What Foucault failed to see was that the Revolution never sought to be anything other than another signifying regime.