

Haunting Foucault: Genealogical Revolution and the Specter of Islam

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The Iranian people's political will is to prevent politics from gaining a foothold. – Michel Foucault¹

Michel Foucault's support for the Iranian Revolution is seemingly awash in contradictions; from a leftist's support for a right-wing theocratic movement to someone whose work has almost entirely been dedicated to micro-political resistance engaging with a macro-political movement. Having written for Italian and French newspapers, the lack of Foucault's conventional jargon makes situating Iran within his corpus difficult and has allowed the revolution to be ignored as a mere footnote or aberration.

However, by contextualizing Iran within his body of work, new insights into Foucault's critiques of politics, methods of resistance, and macro-political alternatives can be garnered. Specifically, Foucault's endorsement of the revolution offers a new mode of social mobilization against politics as such; a form of action I refer to as "genealogical revolution." Additionally, Foucault's portrayal of "Islamic Government" as an aspirational ideal that is knowingly and inherently unrealizable is comparable to Jacques Derrida's notion of "hauntology" implemented as a method of macro-political organization and engagement.

The 1960s and 1970s offered many revolutionary and social movements, but none quite captured Foucault's imagination as Iran did in 1978. For Foucault, the Iranian Revolution offered something new – a different conceptualization of politics and history – which he specifically contrasted against China, Cuba, Vietnam, and the unrest of 1968.² These movements were "stuck" in history, a continuation of modernist politics transfixed by the dichotomy of capitalism versus communism.

Taking Alfred North Whitehead and Francis Fukuyama seriously, these ideologies are the culmination of two and a half millennia of philosophical tradition from Plato³ to the "end of history."⁴ Foucault frames it similarly in his interview with Baqir Parham citing the rise of modernity's two "painful consequences" and the need to abandon every foundational principle from which they arose.⁵ Iran offered such a struggle against both Cold War ideologies and the legacy from whence they were derived seeking to create an alternate political imagination entirely divorced from the European tradition.⁶ Perhaps nothing better encapsulates Foucault's endorsement than the revolution's slogan, "Neither West nor East, but Islam."⁷

Islam proposed a new form of sociopolitical organization. This was no mere third option, a capitalism or communism with Islamic characteristics, but the formation of an alternative ideological legacy from that of Europe. In this way, Iran was a singularity that offered both the creation of a

¹ Michel Foucault, "A Revolt with Bare Hands," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 212.

² *Ibid.*, 210-1.

³ Alfred North Whitehead famously claimed that, "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.," Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, eds. David Ray Griffin & Donald Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 39.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama put forward the position that the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War marked the end of ideological opposition to liberal democratic governments and as such constituted the "end of history.," Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 2006).

⁵ Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, "Dialogue Between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 184-6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 185-6.

⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 32.

new politics and, more important even than its successful implementation, the revelation that alternative political structures were even a possibility. If the competition between capitalism and communism marked the end of history, Iran showed that it only marked the end for the European conceptualization and that alternatives existed to contest this legacy with novel ideational approaches.

In his writings, Foucault constantly returns to the theme of Iran as a break or rejection of the ideological pillars of the Cold War. Foucault viewed Iran's antagonism to the West as complete. There was no sufficiently liberal reform alternative to the Shah's corrupt despotism whether economic,⁸ political,⁹ or both. Indeed, capitalism, corruption, and the burgeoning globalization¹⁰ of Iran's political economy were definitionally associated with the regime.¹¹ The failure of the Shah's land reforms collapsed Iran's agricultural industry and triggered a massive urban migration adding pressure to the manufacturing and bazaar merchant classes already struggling to compete with foreign imports.¹² The wealthy meanwhile utilized their economic connections to reap the benefits of these reform projects – both agrarian land grants and urban construction projects¹³ – and hid their money in Western banks and investments.¹⁴ Speaking with an Iranian economist, Foucault found his framing, “[corruption] is the *regime*.”¹⁵

Socialism, as Foucault notes, would not suffice as an alternative to the Shah's American capitalism just as no turn to the Soviet Union, for him, was conceivable.¹⁶ Stalin had shown the threat the USSR posed to Iran with the occupation of the Azerbaijani provinces in 1946 (the Azerbaijan Crisis or *غائله آذربایجان*).¹⁷ Additionally, both the National Front (the legacy party of Mohammad Mossadeq) and the Communist Party had shown their complicity with or inclination towards authoritarian nationalist politics and dependency varying upon their proximity to the Shah.¹⁸

Ideologically, any Marxist alternative was situated in opposition to Islam just as the Shah's Westernization efforts had been during the White Revolution. In interviews,¹⁹ Foucault constantly

⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Challenge to the Opposition,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 213-4.; Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 220-2.

⁹ Michel Foucault, “A Revolt with Bare Hands,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 212-3.

¹⁰ Foucault considers Iran as possibly the “first great insurrection against global systems.”; Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 222.

¹¹ 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), 195.

¹² *Ibid.*, 195-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, “What Are the Iranians Dreaming [Révent] About?,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 203.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 220-1.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Army – When the Earth Quakes,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 192.; Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 220-1.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, “Dialogue Between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 186.; Michel Foucault, Claire Brière, & Pierre Blanchet, “Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 255.

returns to Marx's claim that "Religion is the opium of the people," and describes it as, "...the phrase that makes the Iranians sneer the most, the one that seems to them the stupidest, the shallowest."²⁰ In all manners – the complicity and actions of communist and National Front partisans, the ideological opposition to Islam, and the historical threat of the USSR – no leftist movement was, in Foucault's mind, an alternative bearable to the revolution.

Certainly, in contrast to many of the leftist supporters of the revolution at the time and the revisionists in the following decades, Foucault was correct in this realization. During the revolution, those Foucault describes as the "politicians" of the movement sought to use Khomeini as a rallying force believing that after the Shah was deposed everyone would "forget the old preacher."²¹ Foucault, however, recognized that Khomeini was not merely a tool but was fundamental to the revolution.²²

To this day, the narrative of the "stolen revolution" where Khomeini coopted a leftist or liberalizing campaign persists. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson's, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, which first translated Foucault's writings on Iran into English, promotes just such a narrative in their criticism of Foucault.²³ On the immediate point, history bears out that the leftist element of the revolution would not come to "win" the aftermath and thus casts in doubt its viability to satisfy the demands of those that took to the streets. More generally regarding the "stolen revolution," Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi offers an excellent response both to the theory generally²⁴ and to Afary and Anderson's use of the theory as a criticism of Foucault.²⁵

The rejection of the capitalism-communism dichotomy was, for Foucault, a denunciation of the project of modernization. This encapsulated both the economic and political developments of Iran throughout the 20th century, particularly after the rise of the first Shah Pahlavi. Reza Khan began the economic development efforts that his son would later expand upon and to which Foucault's criticism has already been discussed. The political reformations began slightly before with the 1906 Constitutional Revolution but it was Reza Khan who ramped up these efforts with a specific aim towards Europeanization.²⁶

Foucault follows the narrative of the Pahlavis as Kemalists oriented towards a tripartite progression of Iran through nationalism, secularism, and modernization.²⁷ While this Kemalist comparison may inflate the level of active engagement the Pahlavi Shahs had in these modernization projects,²⁸ there is no doubt that they both aspired towards such and were publicly linked to these efforts. As Foucault claims, "...'modernization' is also something older that sticks to the current

²⁰ Michel Foucault, "Tehran: Faith Against the Shah," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201.

²¹ 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.

²² Michel Foucault, "The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 222.

²³ Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 105.

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, "Misrepresenting the Revolution, Misreading Foucault," in *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 75-112.

²⁶ 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), 196-7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁸ Farzin Vejdani, *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2015), 8.

monarch, and that is his *raison d'être*. It is something that is the basis not only of his government, but also of his dynasty.”²⁹

Searching for a break from the European tradition that underlies this modernization and the Cold War dichotomy, the revolution's promotion of Islam as an alternative was a novel solution. To many, particularly in the West, this seems a counter-intuitive position. After all, is not a return to Islamic fanaticism a regression? Such is the critique of Foucault offered by an Iranian woman using the pseudonym Atoussa H.³⁰ and by Maxime Rodinson³¹ whom Afary and Anderson echo in labelling Khomeinism an “archaic fascism.”³²

Foucault's terse response to Atoussa H., offers two refutations to the charge. First, that it is an oversimplification of Islam and its ideational role in the revolution such that the charge of fanaticism may stick. Second, the appeal to Western scorn of Islam is an Orientalist attempt to divert attention away from its political force as a response to the European tradition.³³

For a more affirmative argument, Foucault reframes the discussion in his article, “The Shah is a Hundred Years Behind the Times.”³⁴ Rather than Islam, it is the modernization project that is the archaism. Some forms of this are blatant such as the attempt to construct a Persian nationalism by tying the monarchy to the Achaemenid Dynasty.³⁵ Others were less antique but nonetheless retrograde movements, such as the aspiration for Europeanization including through racial identification via the Aryan myth.³⁶ For Foucault, the archaism was the European tradition to which the regime aspired, novelty could only be found in the rejection of this attempt. As he stated, “[The Shah] is fifty years old and a hundred years behind the times... Today, it is his project of modernization, his despotic weapons, and his system of corruption that are archaic. It is ‘the regime’ that is the archaism.”³⁷

Foucault's framing of the Iranian Revolution in this way was not merely conjecture, the movement very much branded itself in this manner. From economists,³⁸ to religious leaders,³⁹ to protestors on the street,⁴⁰ those that Foucault engaged with never contextualized the movement as a return to the Islamic governments of the past but as a progressive movement premised on the opposition to Europe's archaic forms. Khomeini specifically makes such a framing of the revolution as a rejection of the entirety of the European tradition:

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Atoussa H, “An Iranian Woman Writes,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 209-10.

³¹ Maxime Rodinson, “Khomeini and the ‘Primacy of the Spiritual,’” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 241.

³² Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 99-100.

³³ Michel Foucault, “Foucault's Response to Atoussa H.,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 210.

³⁴ 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), 194-8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 196-7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 197-8.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, “Tehran: Faith Against the Shah,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201.

⁴⁰ 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), 206.

We understand what Islam is, and we understand what a republic means. But as for ‘democratic,’ that is a concept that has constantly changed its guise throughout history. In the West it means one thing, and in the East, another. Plato described it one way, and Aristotle another way. We don’t understand any of it. And why should something we don’t understand appear on the ballot form for us to vote on? We understand Islam and we know what it is – namely, justice.⁴¹

Khomeini would continue to articulate that the juxtaposition of “Islam” with “democracy” was an insult to Islam as the religion was thus posited to be lacking the necessary virtues when in fact, as with justice, this was its very “substance.”⁴²

The interview in which Khomeini made these remarks would not be published until January of 1980, well after Foucault had departed Iran both physically and philosophically. However, the exact same sentiment was relayed to Foucault by an Iranian religious scholar (it is unclear if this is Ayatollah Shariatmadari to whom he refers to early in the same article or another theologian).⁴³

The promotion of a new legacy of thought to ground political theorization captivated Foucault as offering the potentiality to break from the oppressive forms of European society.⁴⁴ For Foucault, the primary question of Iran was not whether the movement would succeed or even the desirability of the resulting sociopolitical organization, more significant was its revelation of alternative modes of theorizing. It is for this reason Foucault refers to his ethics as “antistrategic” in his final summation of his work on Iran, “Is it Useless to Revolt?”⁴⁵

It is not enough to have political change, Foucault sought to change politics. Iran represented as much being “a strike *in relation* to politics.”⁴⁶ The rejection of the European philosophical tradition and promotion of an alternative showed that history is neither linear, finite, nor universal but rather is a site of differing and competing struggles for power. The hegemony of modernity resulted in the offering of only two ideological options for non-Western post-colonial states. Iran, however, sought to reject not merely foreign political control but foreign politics as such. The revelation of an alternative historical mode removed the normative power and deterministic narratives of European politics. The very existence of this alternative repudiates what Foucault critiques as traditional or objective history.⁴⁷

Against objective history, Foucault offers three principle lines of criticism. First, the pursuit of essentialism believes that in origins a purity of identity or concept may be discovered, a metaphysical commitment to the notion that truth may be found in the past.⁴⁸ Rather, the genealogist, Foucault’s alternative to the historian, seeks to uncover the inventions of the past realizing that nothing is inherent or fundamental to history but instead that it always already was in a constant state of flux.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, “The Religious Scholars Led the Revolt,” in ed. and trans. Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)* (North Haledon, NJ: Mizan Press, 1981), 337.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 337-8.

⁴³ 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), 206-7.

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, “Dialogue Between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 185-6.

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, “Is it Useless to Revolt?,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 266-7.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, “A Revolt with Bare Hands,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 212.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in ed. Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 86-7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-9.

The second criticism is the framing of history as directed towards progress. The inversion of the first, wherein meaning and truth are found and retroactively ascribed from the destined conclusion – a teleological view of linear progress.⁵⁰ Genealogy abandons the notion of constants and suprahistories, that an event is a part of a continuous succession towards an ideal end. Events are instead moments of contestation between powers seeking to dominate historical narratives.⁵¹

These two challenges target the objective framing of history. Foucault's third criticism is directed towards the historians' framing of themselves. The traditional historian seeks to divorce themselves from their position within history claiming an objectivity free of passion or opinion.⁵² Such a position, a sacrifice of subjectivity, is impossible. Implicit within such a history is a teleology and supremacy of the present and the objective guise, an incursion of metaphysical absolutes through the ascetic ideal and a reductionism of the past.⁵³ Such a historian is inherently shaped by the metanarratives of their time and sacrifices history towards their maintenance and preservation.

The genealogists proposes a different methodology that engages with history sans suprahistorical metanarratives and instead with a past in constant flux.⁵⁴ Genealogy embraces the parodic ridicule of absolutist framings and static identities, rejecting the attempt to claim a reality of history as reminiscence.⁵⁵ Secondly, genealogy is dissociative challenging conceptualizations of identity and framings of history as tradition or teleology.⁵⁶ Lastly, genealogy sacrifices truth and history as knowledge understanding it rather as a will to knowledge. As such, no singular history nor objective posture towards it exists, but rather it is a violent contest amongst a plurality of truths.⁵⁷

On the surface, a religious movement with its associated metaphysical baggage – religious essentialism, eschatology as teleology, and Islam as a grand narrative – seemingly contradicts with Foucault's critique of objective history. However, the uniqueness of Iranian Shi'ism (or at least Foucault's understanding of it) enables it to avoid these pitfalls. For Foucault, Shi'ism is a religion of political awakening in opposition to the state throughout history.⁵⁸ As such, it lacks the power to hegemonically declare absolute norms. Rather, clerics are dependent upon the desirability and appeal of their teachings for their financial capacity and spiritual authority.⁵⁹ In this way, Shi'a Islam is inherently in flux, a competition between varying interpretations with only the affirmation by the oppressed as a means to gain any functional authority.⁶⁰

Foucault's understanding of Shi'a Islam is not altogether inaccurate although it is certainly oversimplified. For the average cleric their influence was derived from the voluntary association of their followers. Even within the clerical hierarchy, which did exist, influence was derived from their followers rather than purely institutionally.⁶¹ Furthermore, Foucault's framing of Shi'a Islam as in

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in ed. Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 86-7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 87-8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 91-2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 93-4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 95-6.

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, "Dialogue Between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 186.

⁵⁹ 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), 205.

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, "Tehran: Faith Against the Shah," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 202.

⁶¹ Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), 38.

opposition to or outside of the state since the second occultation of the Imam was mostly correct.⁶² However, Foucault's tacit admission of varying interactions with different dynasties understates the degree to which Shi'ism's political engagements reformed its organizational structure and role in state power.⁶³ An example of such being its role in civil courts and the practice of *ijtihad*, although, no standardization of Islamic practice or norms was ever implemented.⁶⁴

For Foucault, the legacy of Shi'ism as an oppositional force to state power sufficiently addressed the concerns of an Islamic movement being inherently contradictory to genealogy. Additionally, throughout his writings Foucault highlights elements of the revolution that seemingly correspond to the three critiques of objective history (essentialism, teleology, and objectivity) and the three qualities of genealogy (parodic, dissociative, and sacrificial).

On essentialism, Foucault identifies several retrograde elements in Iran in 1978. Some, particularly the conventional partisans, desired a return to the 1906 Constitution, the establishment of a regency, or the limitation or removal of the Shah.⁶⁵ The Shah, himself, attempted to make an identity-based claim back to the Achaemenid Dynasty, famously celebrating the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire to draw an imperial connection to himself.⁶⁶ Tied to this festival and a general nationalist project in Iran was the claim of a Persian identity rooted in the Aryan myth.⁶⁷ (However, the role of the Aryan myth in domestic national identity production is overstated, particularly by Western sources, including Foucault. Claims to Aryanism were more a construct of and appeal to European politicians and academics.)⁶⁸ Indeed, nationalism and the broader efforts of the Kemalist program were what Foucault regarded as the archaism of Iran's modernization project.⁶⁹

Of course, the Shah was not a revolutionary nor were the partisan elements the groups that Foucault supported. In response to these, Foucault's understanding of the Khomeinist revolt was their total and complete negation.⁷⁰ Foucault describes Khomeini as a "mythical figure," whose adoration can be found in his three negations of conventional politics and the regime. First, that Khomeini *is not there* having been exiled and unwilling to return until the ouster of the Shah. Second, that he *says nothing* other than no to the Shah and his modernization. Finally, that Khomeini *is not a politician* and that he, Foucault believed, would not form a Khomeini party or government.⁷¹

All three genealogical elements can be witnessed in this framing of Khomeini. Parodic in his separation from Iran – a revolutionary 3,000 miles from his revolution, an Iranian banned from and unwilling to return to Iran, and the severance of his Iranian-ness so long as it invoked the regime. Dissociative in his rejection of the Shah and modernization. The abandonment of the notion of

⁶² 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), 205.

⁶³ Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham, "Dialogue Between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 186.

⁶⁴ Abbas Amanat, "From *ijtihad* to *wilayat-i faqih*: The Evolving of Shi'ite Legal Authority to Political Power," *Logos* 2, no. 3 (2003): 2.

⁶⁵ 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), 194-5, 294.

⁶⁶ Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, NJ: Yale UP, 2017), 664-5.

⁶⁷ 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.

⁶⁸ Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), 29-30.

⁶⁹ 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), 198.

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, "The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 222.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

history as linear with a Shah who ties himself to the ancient empire yet is enthralled with the new millennium and ambitions of “progress” defined by European theories of development.⁷² Finally, sacrificial in his disinterest in political power (at least in Foucault’s understanding). Rather, Khomeini is the expression of a collective will in a contest between competing ideologies.⁷³ As such, Khomeini reveals both the contingencies of these ideologies and the power of will as a *force*.⁷⁴

Beyond Khomeini, the revolution’s rejection of the Shah’s nationalist and modernization programs was a dissociative position. Foucault’s regard of these efforts as the true archaism makes a distinction between the revolution’s conception of Iranian identity from the historical connections the Shah attempted to make to both ancient Persia and the Aryan myth.⁷⁵ This is something inherently tied into the way the revolutionaries understood the Shah – irrespective of his Iranian or Persian ethnic ancestry he and his regime were an expression of foreign occupation.⁷⁶

The principle demand of the revolution, particularly for Khomeini’s wing, was the deposing of the Shah. How that would occur was a matter of contention amongst the various revolutionary factions. Khomeini circumvented this discussion through the call for Islamic government which would leave the partisan elements no capacity to affect the referendum that would oust the Shah – they would either be in opposition the popular movement, or they would accept an Islamic government that would negate their ideological premises and political power.⁷⁷ Thus, Islamic government was definitionally a method of deposing the Shah through a “strike against politics.”⁷⁸

However, the call for Islamic government as a form of organization post-Shah was not a demand to return to the Islamic Caliphates of old. Even if it were desired, it would not be possible in the absence of the Twelfth Imam. Rather, the appeal to Islamic government was a call to “justice” wherein justice was viewed as the source of law instead of its consequence.⁷⁹ As Ayatollah Shariatmadari told Foucault, “We are waiting for the Mahdi, but each day we fight for a good government.”⁸⁰

Islamic government was a demand for the creation of a fundamentally new system wherein no singular understanding of Allah’s will was possible – such was the role of the Imam. Instead, Islamic government was a hermeneutic exercise wherein competing interpretations of justice, the Quran, and so on would attempt to gain their legitimacy through their collective power. However, no hierarchy could exist (in Foucault’s understanding) to dictate the Islamic “ideal” and therefore any adopted notion was always contingent upon the continued assent or will of the governed.⁸¹ Thus, Islamic government was sacrificial. It had to abandon the historical method and conception of Islamic government and propose a new form that was incapable of constructing static absolutes.

⁷² 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), 194, 196-7.

⁷³ Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 222.

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, “Tehran: Faith Against the Shah,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 202-3.

⁷⁵ 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), 196-7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, “A Revolt with Bare Hands,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 213.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁷⁹ Michel Foucault, “Tehran: Faith Against the Shah,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201-2.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 201-2.

As an alternative to the European tradition, Islamic government was in one way a novel approach. But even its apparent appeal to tradition did not taint it as an archaism, as the absence of the Mahdi rendered any reminiscence for the caliphate impossible. Rather, Islamic government was a parodic rejection of history supplanted by the transformation of despair, misery, and discontentedness into a force – a form of expression, yearning, and way of being together.⁸²

If not an archaic expression of essentialism, was the Iranian Revolution a teleologically guided movement? As Islamic government was first the rejection of the Shah, it was inherently a parodic politics of negation. There was no desire for the conventional modes of political coalition forming or governmental institutions. As such, there were no teleological aspirations of ideal modes of capitalist or communist social organization. But even within Islamic government itself, there was no static political government. As a hermeneutic practice, Islamic government would necessarily be in a state of constant flux subject to competing notions of justice always understood as contingent and fluid.⁸³

Of course, Shi'ism is an eschatological religion with the return of the Mahdi marking the “reign of the true order of Islam on Earth.”⁸⁴ However, no action or creation of a sufficiently Islamic government can trigger the Imam's return.⁸⁵ Instead, the Mahdi and the “true order of Islam” function as a source of inspiration and desire for truth in the form of self-enlightenment.⁸⁶ Thus, history is not some series of events marking the progression towards the teleological end. Rather, the eschatology of Shi'ism is severed or dissociated from actions and government formations that occur strictly in the present.

The need to establish good government while awaiting the Mahdi attempts to form a counter-memory – a sacrifice of history – wherein the future does not retroactively provide meaning to the present. There is no achievable end of a sufficiently just or Islamic government nor any act to trigger construction through the return of the Mahdi. Instead, Shi'ism engages in a passive eschatology focused on the struggle to find and improve upon justice in the here and now.⁸⁷

Lastly, the revolution as a critique of objectivity. As mentioned, Iran was a rejection of the modernist dichotomy of capitalism versus communism. As such, it refused to engage with and indeed sacrificed, the European tradition that viewed itself as a universalizable and objective treatment of history and its suprahistorical narrative of linear progression through development and modernization.⁸⁸

Instead, the revolution was an expression of popular will⁸⁹ – a parodic embracing of diverse subjectivities – that would culminate in the formation of a government premised upon the contestation of ideas engaged in a dissociative and hermeneutic endeavor to interrogate justice.⁹⁰ The

⁸² Michel Foucault, “Tehran: Faith Against the Shah,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 202-3.

⁸³ Michel Foucault, “A Revolt with Bare Hands,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 212-3.

⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, “Tehran: Faith Against the Shah,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸⁶ 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), 205-6.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 205-6.

⁸⁸ 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), 194, 196-7.

⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, “A Revolt with Bare Hands,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 212-3.

⁹⁰ 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), 206.

lack of clerical hierarchy prevents anyone from taking a position outside or superior to any other individual – all positions are recognized as subjective.

Understanding Iran as a “genealogical revolution” reveals two things. First, the revolution was an effort to construct a counter-memory – a proposal for an alternative history that abandons the European philosophical tradition – revealing the potentiality of divergent modes and sources of history, philosophy, and political thought. Thus, it is not a question of if the revolution or Islamic government would succeed or if their ends were desirable but rather the role of the revolution as a singularity in revealing the existence of potentialities.⁹¹ Thus, even if Foucault were to be wrong in his predictions for Iran, which even he would come to say he was, this does not wholly discredit the endorsement or optimism he had in 1978. Furthermore, for those who study Foucault, Iran offers an opportunity to understand what underlies his method and approach towards history and where he situates value – in other words, Iran provides an example of how to look at history both genealogically and antistrategically.⁹²

Secondly, genealogical revolutions are in opposition to politics as such. This is not to say that they are apolitical, quite the opposite, they are anti-political. Iran did not take a passive or neutral stance to the Cold War ideologies but sought to overthrow the dichotomy itself. All political parties within Iran were perceived as associated with international powers.⁹³ The revolution was, in this manner, an anti-colonial endeavor against the colonization not of just foreign hegemony but the political scene as such, which was always already foreign.

In opposition to this politics is the political will of the Iranian people. This is a distinct form of politics that disengages from the conventional methods of essentialism (typical of reactionary and populist movements) and teleology (typical of Marxist-Leninists and progressives). Rather, genealogical revolution is the insurrection of subjugated knowledges.⁹⁴ It is micro-resistance as an “aesthetic of self-creation”⁹⁵ on a macro-political level offering a new mode of action, a new means of challenging power, for Foucault.

The Iranian Revolution was not merely a rejection but also proposed an alternative in the form of Islamic government. While for Foucault, Islamic government is first and foremost an anti-political method of opposing the Shah without endorsing or empowering conventional political institutions, it does propose a novel form of politics. Foucault describes this politics as a will or force rooted in Islam for which there was near unanimous support by the Iranian populace but with no clear or, more importantly, static definition.⁹⁶

For Foucault, Islamic government is not theocratic or clerical rule.⁹⁷ Such is not possible based on the history and theology of Shia Islam with the ever present yet absent Mahdi unavailable to take the traditional seat of power yet simultaneously precluding any other theocrat from taking up that position. Instead, Islamic government functions as an abstraction that guides politics but is limited by the practical and pragmatic conditions of the present. Additionally, as mentioned, there is

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, “Is it Useless to Revolt?,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 266-7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 266-7.

⁹³ Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 221-2.

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 81.

⁹⁵ Jessica Kulynych, “Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation,” *Polity* 30, no. 2 (1997): 328-9.

⁹⁶ Michel Foucault, “A Revolt with Bare Hands,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 212-3

⁹⁷ 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), 206.

no possibility for prompting the return of the Mahdi or making “true” Islamic government realizable - it is not an achievable end provided sufficient conditions are met. Thus, Islamic government, like the Mahdi, is ever present yet always already absent.

For this reason, Foucault discusses Islamic government as an abstraction, an ideal to be “strived for” rather than implemented or every truly achieved.⁹⁸ As both an impossibility and an ideal constrained by pragmatic limitations and lacking a figure to determine absolutist doctrines, Islamic government is necessarily subject to interpretations. Differing understandings of the ideal – what constitutes valid pragmatic limitations, determinations of what priorities take precedence, and so on – necessitates contestation between subjective positions. Islamic government is thus not static but itself subject to the political will enabling it to be constantly in flux and answerable, like the clerical establishment, to the whims of the population to which it is subject.⁹⁹

In Foucault studies, such a macro-political schema for political institutionalization has no direct parallel as his focus was always on challenging institutional power and the affirmation of subjectivities – in other words, critique.¹⁰⁰ Yet one can be found in the works of Jacques Derrida, namely, hauntology. If what Islamic government was not made Iran a genealogical revolution, what Islamic government would be, as a new mode of politics, is what made it hauntological.

Introduced by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*,¹⁰¹ hauntology is an allusion to Marx’s opening quote from the *Communist Manifesto*, “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism” (*sic*).¹⁰² In typical Derridean fashion, hauntology is never explicitly defined. When introducing the concept, he only mentions hauntology a handful of times scattered throughout the text with varying descriptions.

Hauntology is an abstraction that serves as a prerequisite to other philosophical notions such as ontology and theology that have served as a sort of “first philosophy.”¹⁰³ It is the hint or notion of a thing that exists prior to the thing-in-itself – the intuition of a concept prior to its ontological presence. As such, hauntology is a necessarily interpretive endeavor where that to which one is privy to is augmented and changed. This implies, as Derrida notes, a performative element to interpretation in which the act of interpreting the thing changes the thing itself.¹⁰⁴

As such, the haunting specter is never itself satisfied or sufficient, complete or realized, yet it is simultaneously not empty nor lacking. Rather the specter exists prior to that which it gives its possibility and remains after as that to which it aspires to be. In other words, it is that which is both to be and not to be (undoubtedly this partially explains Derrida’s continuous references to *Hamlet*).¹⁰⁵ To be, because it gives the conditions for the coming into being of the thing. Not to be, because its completion is infeasible but remains as an aspiration.¹⁰⁶

The specter is thus omnipresent. Its haunting occurs at the very construction of the concept and to realize it materially is an act of “conjuring” or “ontological exorcism.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, the haunting

⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, “What Are the Iranians Dreaming [Rêvant] About?,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 206.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 205-7.

¹⁰⁰ Michel Foucault and Didier Eribon, “Practicing Criticism,” in trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Lawrence Kritzman, *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture – Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 154-5.

¹⁰¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁰² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), 218.

¹⁰³ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 10-1, 61-2, 206.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 61-3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 201-2.

specter is not an empirical measure – the notion is understood before it is made tangible – but rather exists abstractly.¹⁰⁸

Additionally, the specter remains after the manifestation of the material form as that to which the thing-in-itself returns. The expectation of the return forms the action. Typical of Derrida, this is framed through contradiction, that something simultaneously repeated-yet-first but also repeated-yet-last. This is because the performative element of interpretation alters the specter. Thus, every first engagement is simultaneously the last engagement with the specter as such. Any subsequent engagement (repetition) is with a new specter that has been altered by the prior encounter, which in turn alters it prior to the next.¹⁰⁹

Put another way, the thing-in-itself is always lacking in comparison to the haunting specter or notion of the thing. As such, there is an aspirational element to fulfill and realize the hauntological or ideal conceptualization of the thing. However, it is impossible for this aspiration to ever be achieved as each conceptualization is slightly different resulting in new elements or qualities attributed to the thing-in-itself which it lacks, even after its alteration.¹¹⁰

Thus, the haunting is not merely prior – the conception of the notion – but remains during and after its conjuring. During, as that to which the thing-in-itself constantly aspires to become. After, as the only moment in which the spectral form may be realized. “After,” is not used in the sense of following the collapse of the thing-in-itself to entropy but rather as the moment after the possibility of its existence, an eschatology. Just as the ghost comes to be after death, the notion or concept comes to be after the end of history, the time in which the thing-in-itself loses the capacity to be altered.¹¹¹

Moving from the abstract, hauntology has been utilized by Derrida and his scholars as a method for ethical engagement with macro-political structures. An example of such utilization is Derrida’s call for an ethic of unconditional hospitality towards refugees in his speech to the International Parliament of Writers in 1996.¹¹²

For Derrida, an ethic of hospitality is an aporia.¹¹³ By calling for unconditional hospitality, a government would be required to admit anyone despite the financial or security burden that refugees may pose to society at large. Yet, the state simultaneously has an obligation of hospitality towards its own population – to secure their financial and physical well-being. As such, an inherent contradiction exists wherein satisfying the ethic of hospitality towards one party negates the ethic towards the other. Even if the refugee poses no actual threat, the unconditional nature of hospitality accepts on behalf of those to whom the government always already has an obligation the assumption of that risk without any means of assurance and without consent.¹¹⁴ This is not merely a question of temporal primacy, the domestic population does not have a better ethical claim simply because they were “here first,” rather it is a reflection of the contradictory demands that lay at the heart of hospitality as an ethic.

These are two irreconcilable demands – the infinitude of the ethical ideal and the pragmatic restrictions necessary for its enactment. Here then is the aporia of hospitality, as Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney explain, “for Derrida, these two orders of the unconditional and the

¹⁰⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 202.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹² Jacques Derrida, “On Cosmopolitanism,” in trans. Mark Dooley & Michael Hughes, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-24.

¹¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000), 65-7.

¹¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 70-1.

conditional are also in a relation of contradiction, where they remain both irreducible to one another and indissociable.”¹¹⁵

If impossible, why then does Derrida demand such an ethic in his 1996 address?¹¹⁶ It was precisely for the impossibility of the ideal that hospitality represents. For Derrida, the ethical demand is a necessary one to place upon the state even if such a demand is never fully realizable.¹¹⁷ The state, limited by its other ethical commitments and pragmatic considerations, always falls short of its ethical obligations. The notion, however, that such limitations should thus negate the burden of other ethical commitments or excuse the failure of the state in satisfying its current obligations is itself unethical.

Rather, the state must consistently be called upon to better reconcile these obligations – the unconditional offering of an *a priori* hospitality and the conditional right of all “others” to hospitality – even if never fully achievable.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, it is incumbent upon all actors, both inside and outside of the state, to continue to make the demand upon the state to satisfy those ethical ideals.¹¹⁹

Here then is hauntology in practice where the ethical ideal – unconditional hospitality – is one that can never be realized but always already exists as a demand. The state must strive for the ideal, the specter, and it is incumbent upon those acting from outside to compel the state to continuously improve in its efforts. The demand of both the specter and those pushing for state to realize it, constitutes the haunting of the state for its failure to live up to its obligations. No policy will ever be sufficiently ethical such that it alleviates the state of this pressure. Rather, the state is forced into a position of continuous transformation ever inching closer to the ideal.

This striving but not achieving provides the counterpoint to the teleology of utilitarian ethics, pragmatic politics, and modernist ideologies. As an aporia, there is no sufficient condition to be satisfied to read the “endpoint” of politics. There is no one act, policy, or ideological victory that can ever constitute the “end of history.” Rather, ethical projects toward the state are a constant set of repetitions in which each success progression towards the ideal is countered by a demand that reveals its failures and the need for even more progress to be made.

In the Iranian Revolution, Islamic government takes the place of hospitality as the specter. Foucault refers to Islamic government as an ideal when discussing how the concept has been described to him.¹²⁰ However, he does so with extreme caution and even abandons the term later, fearing teleological aspersions, preferring the label “political will.”¹²¹ Yet, the way he describes this will as a “political spirituality” which functions in opposition to conventional politics to give people the means to resist state power and make demands upon the state does parallel hauntology as political practice.¹²²

In contrast to the conventional political structures of capitalism and communism, liberalism and authoritarianism, Islamic government cannot be implemented or achieved. When Foucault recites an oversimplification that, “...for Shi’ism, all power is bad if it is not the power of the Imam,” he does so in setting up the impossibility for the implementation of a formal Shi’a theocratic

¹¹⁵ Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney, preface to *On Cosmopolitanism*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), xi.

¹¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “On Cosmopolitanism,” in trans. Mark Dooley & Michael Hughes, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-24.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹²⁰ 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), 206.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 208-9.

government as the Mahdi is no longer present.¹²³ The clerical establishment, to Foucault, has no capacity for formal control – no religious right to such a claim.¹²⁴ As such, Islamic government is not the formal creation of theocratic institutions. Rather, it is the demand for the *fight* for a good government in the present, a fight for justice.¹²⁵

Like Islamic government, the Mahdi remains a spectral figure. Foucault describes the Twelfth Imam as “invisible” prior to his return yet not “absent” in the present.¹²⁶ Instead, the function of the Mahdi is his capacity to promote self-enlightenment and, in this way, make his presence known. Here though, Foucault is explicit that this is not enlightenment in the sense of proffered absolutes. Invoking the uniqueness of Twelver Shi’ism, Foucault emphasizes that the Second Occultation of the Twelfth Imam interrupted the revelation of Islam’s truths. What remains is the inspiration to quest for truth but never the right to claim it.¹²⁷

Foucault’s (mis)understanding of clerical structure is vital here. The lack of hierarchical structure provides independence within Shi’a institutions, no one cleric can make a claim to truth over any other from a position of authority. Instead, they are dependent upon their, for lack of a better term, followers.¹²⁸ It is an inversion of typical religious power structures where power is derived from the flock rather than emanating from the shepherd.

It should be no surprise the appeal such a governmental structure has for Foucault. Institutional legitimacy is derived purely by the will of the individual to assent to, not the power of authority, but the conforming of that authority to one’s subjectivity. It is a government formed from the aesthetic of self-creation – rooted not in the absolutes of origins or teleology but in the recognition of its fluidity and propensity to change.

The echo of this structure to democracy is not lost on Foucault. Indeed, in discussions with an unnamed religious authority, Foucault brings up precisely this point fearing for its vulnerabilities. The answer offered speaks to Islam’s promotion of values that underly these structures and its capacity to preserve them.¹²⁹ Immediately following, Foucault frames that understanding in the transformability of Islam to respond situationally to the needs and will of the people. First, in its capacity to transform a collective will into a revolutionary force. Second, in its capacity to supplant the state through the formation of alternative political centers within the existing religious structures as both hubs of resistance and sources of creation.¹³⁰

Thus, a parallel can be drawn between Islamic government and the ethic of hospitality. Both are abstract notions of justice that haunts politics both in its impossibility and its aspirational aims. At their heart lays a hermeneutic practice in which competing wills (ethical priorities, interpretations of justice, and pragmatic concerns) contend to frame the ideal through an appeal to the collective will. This invitation to participate, to make demands upon the law and compel it to conform to a justice not yet present is the practice of hauntology. As James K. A. Smith states:

In the language of *Specters of Marx*, we could say that justice *haunts* the law and its institutions, comes back (from its future) to disturb us and keep us awake at night, reminding us that the law has some answering to do *to* justice, that the law answers *to* justice for its *in*justices.

¹²³ 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), 205-6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹²⁵ Michel Foucault, “Tehran: Faith Against the Shah,” in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 205-6.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

...The ghosts of justice that haunt our current practices and institutions – like the ghosts that haunted Hamlet or Scrooge – come to us with *invitations*: they invite us to see things otherwise, and to then participate in effecting a transformation.¹³¹

Of course, Foucault's dream for Iran would not come to pass. While he would disavow the Islamic Republic that followed, he refrained from interrogating what erroneous assumptions led him astray. Perhaps he felt that Iran simply succumbed to the ease of conventional political structures or that the temptations of wealth and power corrupted the clerical establishment. Whatever the case, certainly there is value in uncovering what about Foucault's understanding of Iran gave him such optimism and enthusiasm for the Revolution. In this effort, "Is it Useless to Revolt?" and Foucault's discussion of singularities and antistrategic ethics is essential.¹³²

However, so to would be an interrogation into where Foucault went wrong which, unfortunately, he never commits to. Certainly, Foucault did recognize relatively early on not just the power of the revolutionary movement and its likelihood of success but accurately situated that force within the religious element that supported Khomeini. He never fell into the trap of the "stolen revolution" narrative. This may simply speak to the comparable ease of, or Foucault's skill in, deciphering what he considers the "strategic" calculations of history. Or, perhaps, it is a testament to the *force* of genealogical revolution.

In any case, Islamic government as a hauntological structure absent of the clerical rule of the mullahs and rooted in hermeneutic debates over justice sans hierarchies never came to fruition. Yet, vestiges of this conceptualization do remain. Iran is not a totalitarian state absent contrasting political, ideological, or theological viewpoints. Frequently, these mechanisms are utilized in campaigns by political reformists and social advocates.¹³³ However, some impediment remains to limit its efficacy and quash what Foucault understood as the "Iranian dream."

There is no need for any singular culprit to explain the entirety of, depending on one's perspective, Foucault or the post-revolutionary government's failure. However, any explanation must recognize the role that the Islamic Republic's institutional structures played. Specifically, in how Khomeini implemented the *vilayat-i faqih* as a method of government.

Despite Foucault's constant proclamations that there would not be a clerical takeover, that was precisely what followed. As has been alluded to throughout this paper, Foucault's conviction in the lack of a clerical hierarchy was a serious misunderstanding of both Shi'a Islam and, more significantly, Khomeini's vision of Islamic government. Whether because Foucault was never aware of Khomeini's interpretation of *vilayat-i faqih* or that he simply failed to understand its implications, in the end, the consequences were the same – the formation of a clerical hierarchy premised on the establishment of a theocratic government.¹³⁴

Certainly, Foucault was correct in recognizing that only with the return of the Mahdi could an Islamic government based on ethical absolutes be formed.¹³⁵ However, the purpose of *vilayat-i*

¹³¹ James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 67.

¹³² Michel Foucault, "Is it Useless to Revolt?," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 263-7.

¹³³ Asef Bayat makes this case for a variety of political and social reform movements in the cited chapter. However, unique emphasis should be placed on the role of competing religious interpretations as foundational to the methodology of these movements as described on pages 84-5.; Asef Bayat, "The Making of a Post-Islamist Movement: Social Movements and Sociopolitical Change in Iran, 1979-1997," in *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007), 49-105.

¹³⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 24-6.

¹³⁵ Michel Foucault, "Tehran: Faith Against the Shah," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201.

faqih was not to cast Khomeini as the returned Imam but to establish a formalized religious hierarchy within the structures of government.¹³⁶ Thus, the role of the Supreme Leader was given not merely the power to determine religious principles, even in opposition to the popular will that so engrossed Foucault as an expression of diverse subjectivities, but was offered the powers of the state to enforce those religious edicts.

Thus, instead of the idyllic philosophical state of hermeneutic interrogations of justice, Iran became another participant in what Foucault describes elsewhere as the cycle of dominations.¹³⁷ Of course, the failure of Islamic government as hauntological practice did not mean the government ceased to evolve. After the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War, more space opened up for ideological contests that sought to reform the Islamic Republic. In the 1990s, new conceptualizations of the *vilayat-i faqih* offered hope for, if not the full realization of Foucault's aspirations, certainly steps in its direction – chief among them, although limited in its likelihood, was the reformation or abolition of the Supreme Leader.¹³⁸

However, the desire of the newly installed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to maintain power and the changing political climate would stall these efforts. Most significant, was the collapse of the reform faction in the mid-2000s. As a by-product of both the dissatisfaction with the slow progress of the reformist president, Khatami, and the international threat posed by American President Bush's inclusion of Iran in the "Axis of Evil," Iranian hardliners benefited from a resurgence of popular support or at least the reclamation of political power.¹³⁹

However, even this political shift did not prevent the rise of new formulations of Islamic government. In light of the international threats and domestic political contests between President Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei, a new school of thought directly oppositional to both Khomeini and Foucault's conceptions of Islamic government rose in prominence, the Mahdaviat school.¹⁴⁰ Whether as a political tool to shift power away from Khamenei to Ahmadinejad or as a legitimate theological endeavor, the Mahdaviat undermines the anti-teleological framings of the relationship between Islamic government and Shi'a eschatology. Specifically, it promotes the notion that the return of the Mahdi is a consequence of the satisfaction of certain politically achievable conditions.¹⁴¹ Thus, good government, as Ayatollah Shariatmadari described it, is not a project to be undertaken for its own sake while awaiting the Mahdi.¹⁴² Instead, good government is defined as the accomplishment of the conditions necessary to bring on his return.

For now, supporters of Mahdaviat have not become prominent enough to fundamentally restructure the Islamic Republic. Though their influence and the political threat it poses are not insignificant. But a new, or perhaps more accurately old, ideology has come about that has already begun to leave its mark.

The 2009 Green Movement made apparent that many even within the regime were beginning to question, if not the legitimacy, the continued viability of the Islamic Republic's religious

¹³⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 24-6.

¹³⁷ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in ed. Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 86-7.

¹³⁸ Asef Bayat, "The Making of a Post-Islamist Movement: Social Movements and Sociopolitical Change in Iran, 1979-1997," in *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007), 90-1.

¹³⁹ Paola Rivetti, *Political Participation in Iran From Khatami to the Green Movement* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan: 2020), 59-60.

¹⁴⁰ Mehdi Khalaji, "Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy," *Agenda: Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008), 16.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14-5.

¹⁴² Michel Foucault, "Tehran: Faith Against the Shah," in Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201.

zealotry.¹⁴³ In response, the government began to shift its framing away from a heavy-handed use of religious messaging and adopted a more traditional nationalism. This included an emphasis on historical comparisons between the Islamic Republic and the previous dynasties in the preservation of Iran's borders,¹⁴⁴ the threat of foreign powers (particularly the U.S.),¹⁴⁵ and the creation of secularized national heroes.¹⁴⁶ From a Foucauldian perspective, this marks a full regression back to the archaisms of the Shah – a return to the philosophical traditions of Europe and the reintroduction of conventional politics.

Foucault's aspirations for Iran as a singularity revealing the potential for alternative modes of politics never fully materialized. Yet, even in that failing, new insights into Foucault's philosophy can be uncovered. The promotion of a macro-political method of resistance in the form of genealogical revolution and the notion of hauntology as an organizing principle for government offer new avenues for political engagement and research. Just as valuable would be the further exploration of what Foucault misunderstood about Iran, particularly regarding the role *vilayat-i faqih* had on the formation of institutional structures. Finally, the subsequent changes that have undermined even those remnants of Islamic government as a guiding specter – the rise of the Mahdaviat school and the return of nationalism – may expose the vulnerabilities of hauntology as a method for government, particularly during times of national crisis and ideological anxiety.

¹⁴³ Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2019), 14-5.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 102-3.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 108-9.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 109-10.