

FOUCAULT IN IRAN, FOUCAULT IN BRAZIL:
POLITICAL SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS
COUNTER-CONDUCTS¹

“El deber de todo cristiano es hacer la revolución.”

—Christians for Socialism

Michel Foucault visited Brazil several times between 1965 and 1976.² A civil-military dictatorship ruled the country at the time. Its rule lasted until 1985. Foucault’s visit to São Paulo on one of his last trips to Brazil coincided with one of the most brutal events in the history of the dictatorship: the arrest, torture, and murder of the journalist Vladimir Herzog. The government ruled this crime a suicide. As Foucault became aware of the event, he immediately interrupted his academic activities in São Paulo to take part in protests against the death of Herzog. A few days earlier at a student assembly at the University of São Paulo (USP), Foucault read a brief statement against the blatant repression of the Brazilian state.³ Just a few days later, on October 31, 1975, he attended a great ecumenical mass at the Sé Cathedral, which was the main church of the São Paulo Archdiocese led by the Archbishop Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns. The mass gathered about eight thousand people, including university students, union members, and great religious authorities, such as the rabbi Henry Sobel and the Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Dom Hélder Pessoa Câmara. The latter was known for his left-wing positions.⁴ Although the deceased journalist was Jewish, Arns was the most important contributor to the ceremony, which had been the greatest act against the dictatorship at that point. A member of the Franciscan order, Arns played an important role in resisting the

dictatorship. He was the organizer of the largest descriptive document of the crimes and tortures committed by the civil-military government, the book *Brasil: Nunca Mais* (Brazil: Never Again).⁵ On his trip, Foucault entered into brief contact with the Brazilian Catholic movement, which elaborated several resistance strategies based on the development of liberation theology throughout the period of the dictatorship. A few years later, in 1978, he would have the occasion to much more closely observe another religiously-inspired resistance movement to an authoritarian government: the Iranian revolution against the dictatorship of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

THE POLITICAL SPIRITUALITY OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

Foucault traveled to Iran in September and November 1978 at the invitation of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. The dictatorial regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, which took power in 1941 through a coup supported by the United States and England, showed clear signs of its decline. Uprisings, public demonstrations, and rallies were increasingly frequent and repressed with increasing violence. After a period of intense revolutionary movement, the following year's almost unanimous election of the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the supreme leader of the country gave rise to an Islamic government.

The newspaper articles written by Foucault about Iran were not limited to a mere description of events. They sought, rather, to understand the social and historical roots of the movement of disputing forces. The final outcome of this experience was a set of fifteen articles. *Corriere della Sera* published

the bulk of the articles and some of them also appeared in French periodicals. During the period of the uprising, those articles were immediately translated into Farsi and read by the protesters. In France, however, they were not well received and sparked a controversy about Foucault's overall stance on the revolutionary events. The new theocratic government's elimination of the rights of several minorities (mainly women and homosexuals) promoted a subsequent identification of Khomeini's regime with the revolutionary movement, which was, in fact, dispersed, contradictory, and multifaceted in its genesis. The only common ground between the new theocratic government and the revolutionary movements was a negation of the regime of the Shah.⁶

The concept of political spirituality appears as Foucault's great theoretical innovation in the totality of his reports on Iran but it is also one of the main sources of misunderstandings of his analysis. To understand the scope of this concept, it is imperative that we locate its articulation within Foucault's work. The term appears only one time in his reports on Iran, at the end of the article "What Are the Iranians Dreaming [*Rêvent*] About?" Foucault posed two questions regarding the political will demonstrated by Iranians in their demand for an Islamic government:

There are also two questions that concern me even more deeply.

One bears on Iran and its peculiar destiny. 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

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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?

The other question concerns this little corner of the earth whose land, both above and below the surface, has strategic importance at a global level. For the people who inhabit this land, what is the point of searching, even at the cost of their own lives, for this thing whose possibility we have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity, a *political spirituality*. I can already hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong.⁷

There is only one other use of this term in the work of Foucault. It appears in a discussion with several historians that took place in May 1978. The discussion was published in 1980 in a book about the nineteenth-century penitentiary system edited by Michelle Perrot, *L'impossible prison*. Foucault offers the following comment in response to a provocation about the differences between his method and Max Weber's ideal type:

The question I won't succeed in answering here but have been asking myself from the beginning is roughly the following: What is history, given that there is continually being produced within it a separation of true and false? By that I mean four things. First, in what sense is the production and transformation of the true/false division characteristic and decisive for our historicity? Second, in what specific ways has this relation operated in Western societies, which produce

scientific knowledge whose forms are perpetually changing and whose values are posited as universal? Third, what historical knowledge is possible of a history that itself produces the true/false distinction on which such knowledge depends? Fourth, isn't the most general of political problems the problem of truth? How can one analyze the connection between ways of distinguishing true and false and ways of governing oneself and others? The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false – this is what I would call 'political spirituality.'⁸

To understand political spirituality, however, one must not restrict oneself to the purely literal use of the term, but instead look for a mode of conceptualization capable of making the connection between the political and the religious. From this perspective, it is possible to detect other references to the concept of political spirituality. Still, in the context of the article "What Are the Iranians Dreaming [*Révent*] About?," Foucault emphasizes the movement "that would allow the introduction of a spiritual dimension into political life, in order that it would not be, as always, the obstacle to spirituality, but rather its receptacle, its opportunity, and its ferment."⁹ This movement struck him as an expression of a political will in its efforts "to politicize structures that are inseparably social and religious in response to current problems."¹⁰ It impressed him as well "in its attempt to open a spiritual dimension in politics."¹¹ Finally, in an interview with journalists Pierre Blanchet and Claire

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Brière, Foucault said of the participants in the Iranian movement:

In relation to the way of life that was theirs, religion for them was like the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity. Shi'ism is precisely a form of Islam that, with its teaching and esoteric content, distinguishes between what is mere external obedience to the code and what is the profound spiritual life; when I say that they were looking to Islam for a change in their subjectivity, this is quite compatible with the fact that traditional Islamic practice was already there and already gave them their identity; in this way they had of living the Islamic religion as a revolutionary force, there was something other than the desire to obey the law more faithfully, there was the desire to renew their entire existence by going back to a spiritual experience that they thought they could find within Shi'ite Islam itself.¹²

Based on Foucault's elaboration of such definitions of political spirituality, we can distinguish three dimensions of the concept for analytical purposes: a *historical* dimension, concerning other temporal experiences; a *religious* dimension related to Shia Islam; and a *subjective* dimension associated with the possibility of a transformation of the self.

During his trips to Iran, Foucault was impressed with the strength of speeches given by mullahs in cemeteries and in mosques. The speeches were so intense that they drew crowds to listen to them. They were so strong that they were recorded

on cassette tapes and then distributed clandestinely. The speeches compelled Foucault to recall other historical experiences:

When the mosques became too small for the crowd, loudspeakers were put in the streets. These voices, as terrible as must have been that of Savonarola in Florence, the voices of the Anabaptists in Münster, or those of the Presbyterians at the time of Cromwell, resounded through the whole village, the whole neighborhood.¹³

These references go a distance in elucidating Foucault's famous phrase about political spirituality as a possibility that the Western world had forgotten ever since the Renaissance. The three movements, which occurred, respectively, in fifteenth-century Italy, in sixteenth-century Germany, and in seventeenth-century England are examples of the intense relationship between political revolt and religious movement that formed as contests over political power found their strength and vocabulary in religious belief. Herein lies the first sense of political spirituality: the problematization of the relation between religion and politics, not as ideology or mystification, but, rather, as a challenging force. Iranian Shi'ism, in this sense, would not present a significant novelty, but would resume the long-lost Western experiences. The religious ceremonial in Iran provided the momentum to risk life in revolt, outside the revolutionary structures that have come to mark the Western world since the eighteenth century. The revolt also put the Iranian men and women in the face of millennial sacrifices and promises, in a dramatic theater that paralyzed the army through demonstrations that took place every forty days, according to the rhythm of a religious calendar

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that referred to a power considered forever damned. For Foucault, the overlapping factors “produced, in the middle of the twentieth century, a movement strong enough to overthrow an apparently well-armed regime while being close to old dreams that the West had known in times past, when people attempted to inscribe the figures of spirituality on political ground.”¹⁴ Religion, in the Western Renaissance and in modern Iran, was the very way of living the revolt.

The historical dimension of the concept of political spirituality begs the following questions: were the revolts above all religious and is political spirituality always necessary for a movement of revolt? Philippe Chevallier points out that Foucault perceived the limit of a purely historical explanation to the connection between spirituality and politics. He states:

What if the expression ‘political spirituality’ meant, in essence, not happy marriage, recent matrimony, but a divorce between the two domains? Therefore, political spirituality should be thought of as an irruption, a tear of time, which cannot be set in history to take a specific institutional form. If it settles there, it becomes simply political, whether it is the policy of the mullahs or the policy of the pro-American liberals of that time.¹⁵

It is necessary for something within the revolt to interrupt the movement of history in order for such a political spirituality to exist. In recovering other historical experiences, Foucault seeks to show the limit of the concept. Its reactivation in the Shi’ite east is not the resumption of a temporal continuum but, rather, the irruption of a new event.

However, if medieval spirituality could lead to disastrous consequences, Iranian spirituality could also follow a similar path. Foucault was particularly interested in apprehending the movement of revolt as something that is historical but also escapes history. In his words:

Revolts belong to history. But, in a certain way, they escape from it. The impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says, 'I will no longer obey,' and throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust seems to me to be something irreducible. Because no authority is capable of making it utterly impossible: Warsaw will always have its ghetto in revolt and its sewers crowded with rebels. And because the man who rebels is finally inexplicable; it takes a wrenching-away that interrupts the flow of history, and its long chains of reasons, for a man to be able, 'really,' to prefer the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey.¹⁶

It is in the suspension of history that political spirituality finds its proper place, even if one must resort to history to understand it.

Herein lies the second dimension of the concept of political spirituality, namely the religious facet in the form of the specificity of Shiite Islam in relation to other religions that were the historical focus of the experience of political spirituality. In emphasizing the particularities of Shi'ism, Foucault was not aspiring to justify a new form of government, as his critics charged. He sought, rather, to describe the political, social, and

religious situation in Iran. As Cavagnis points out, it was not about debating if Muslim spirituality is better than the dictatorship of the Shah so much as about developing a descriptive analysis. He writes, “Political spirituality is therefore a *descriptive* or *comprehensive* schema, not a *normative* or *apologetic* one. It is a methodological or conceptual proposition attempting to account for and problematize the historical reality of the 1978 uprising.”¹⁷

Foucault also questioned the Iranian will to found an Islamic government, wondering whether it would constitute a reconciliation, contradiction, or novelty. The following question is at the core of his interrogation of Shi’ite spirituality: Is Shia Islam essentially a religion of contestation? Cavagnis suggests a negative answer to this question. Otherwise, the revolution would just be an endless repetition of facts. And Shia Islam, as Foucault himself pointed out, was not essentially revolutionary. The clergy had a dubious relationship with the secular authorities throughout Iran’s history. What then appeared in the revolt was a transformation in the conception of Islam. Cavagnis observes:

It seems that Foucault perceived such complexity when he evoked, in ‘What are the Iranians Dreaming About,’ the ‘novelty’ or ‘faith in the creativity of Islam’ at work in the uprisings, a reverse principle to the idea of a simple return to an essential content that it would suffice to ‘rediscover.’ In fact, something new happened in the 1978 uprisings, a transformation of the conception of Islam by the Iranians themselves.¹⁸

This reinvention of Islam through the revolutionary experience is due to the theology of Ali Shariati, who was a sociologist allegedly killed by the Shah's regime and whose influence on the demonstrators was greater than that of Khomeini himself. Shariati did not advocate a clerical government, since he thought that Shi'ism, in its essence, had not yet fully manifested itself in Iran. The support of the clergy for the governments was a misrepresentation of Shia's truth. For Cavagnis, Foucault's comprehension of the Islamic idea of the state derives from Shariati's theology. Cavagnis writes:

Foucault repeats several times that the 'Islamic government,' in 1978, is not strictly speaking a *project* or a draft of a *political program* On the contrary, it is a short-circuiting of any political structuring that Foucault notices through a rejection of the regime in place, of course, but also a rejection of any partisan and programmatic organization.¹⁹

Foucault reports in his writings that by "Islamic government" no one in Iran understood a regime in which the clergy would play a leading role. The expression designates something that would refer to the past, but aims at a future. In Foucault's words:

It is something very old and also very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet, but also of advancing toward a luminous and distant point where it would be possible to renew fidelity rather than maintain obedience. In pursuit of this ideal, the distrust of legalism seemed

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to me to be essential, along with a faith in the creativity of Islam.²⁰

The Islamic government desired by the demonstrators was not the theocratic religious government that it turned out to be. And the political spirituality manifested in the cry for Islamic government was not the desire for a clerical government. Consequently, Foucault talks about *spirituality* and not about political *theology*, moving away from a legalistic and legal definition of religion. What the revolutionaries manifested was not the desire to install Islamic law as the constitution of the country, nor the will to obey more faithfully the religious code. It was, rather, the faith that Islam was capable of being a creative center for the emergence of a new order and a new existence. This insight is at the core of the political spirituality expressed by the Iranians. As Cavagnis points out:

[Foucault] prefers to study prefers to study the relationship between uprising and spirituality, understood as a way of relating to time, to oneself and to others, to a way of conducting oneself that goes beyond any legal form. The ‘Islamic government,’ for the protesters of 1978, did not therefore designate a political government in the classical sense - that is to say legal - but a self-government defying in a way any legal government imposed by an external law, whether it is secular or religious.²¹

Shia Islam would not bring in itself, in its essence, in its code, a germ of subversion and revolt. However, as it was the vocabulary of the demonstrators, it could lead to another way for them to govern themselves. Once again, we must refer to the

theology of Shariati to understand this new reading of Shi'ism. According to Shariati, Muhammad declares himself to be the last of the prophets not because his prophecy is valid until the end of time, but because after him man does not need to be guided any longer in his existence. The prophecy is concluded after the arrival of Mohammad and the accomplishments of Greek, Roman, and Islamic civilizations. Armed with this basic insight from the sacred books of the Bible and the Quran, one does not need new prophecies, and one can only rely on oneself in the guidance of one's life.²² Shi'ism, as conceived by Shariati, would then be a practice of freedom, the spiritual vehicle for a technique of the self. As Cavagnis writes, "Political spirituality' . . . is not therefore an essential content of Shi'ism that Foucault discovered, but rather a practice of freedom taking the form of a spiritual practice consisting of a transformation of oneself."²³

The last dimension of political spirituality to be considered is thus the subjective one. As Foucault points out in the previously quoted interview with Blanchet and Brière, Shi'ism was the "promise and guarantee" of the possibility of radically changing subjectivity and completely renewing existence.²⁴ We can only understand the act of revolt in the desire for the renewal of subjective experience. According to Foucault:

Yet, whatever the economic difficulties, we still have to explain why there were people who rose up and said: We're not having any more of this. In rising up, the Iranians said to themselves – and this perhaps is the soul of the uprising: 'Of course, we have to change this regime and get rid of this man, we have to change this corrupt administration, we have to change the whole country, the political organization, the eco-

conomic system, the foreign policy. But, above all, we have to change ourselves. Our way of being, our relationship with others, with things, with eternity, with God, etc., must be completely changed, and there will only be a true revolution if this radical change in our experience takes place.²⁵

It is clear that the desire for radical change in existence along with a politically consistent collective will, which provided strength to the Iranian revolution, still relied on traditions and institutions filled with a negative content, such as anti-Semitism, chauvinism, and exclusion. Foucault recognizes this altogether important detail.²⁶ However, in terms of a political spirituality, it would be necessary to foreground the creative force encouraging the revolt and rendering its destiny unclear at the very moment of insurrection. The fact that a theocratic authoritarian government had been established at the end of the revolution does not invalidate the force of political spirituality as a radical will. The example of the Iranian movement will not be forgotten:

The Iranian movement did not come under that 'law' of revolutions which brings to visibility, so it would seem, the tyranny lurking within them, beneath the blind enthusiasm. What constituted the most internal and the most intensely experienced part of the uprising bore directly on an overloaded political chessboard. But this contact was not an identity. The spirituality which had meaning for those who went to their deaths has no common measure with the bloody government of an integrist clergy. The Iranian clerics want to authenticate their regime by using the signifi-

cations that the uprising had. People here reason no differently when they discredit the fact of the uprising because today there is a government of mullahs. In both cases, there is ‘fear.’ Fear of what happened in Iran last autumn, something the world had not produced an example of for a long time.

Hence, precisely, the need to grasp what is irreducible in such a movement – and deeply threatening for any despotism, whether that of yesterday or that of today.²⁷

It is the revolt that introduces subjectivity into history. It is this dimension of political spirituality that Foucault was able to observe more intensely in the Iranian movement. The will to completely modify oneself interrupts the continuous movement of history, thereby modifying the regime of truth to which the subject is submitted. We shall once again consider the last definition of political spirituality, as expressed by Foucault after the Iranian texts: “the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false.”²⁸ Therefore, political spirituality is a perpetual recalcitrance, the will for a continuous transformation of the subject by himself or herself.

Building on this effort to understand what Foucault construed as political spirituality through his Iranian experience, I would now like to return to Brazil in 1975, when he only briefly witnessed a bishop in action against the dictatorship. I want to revisit this moment to demonstrate another example of political spirituality. I will use Foucault’s concept of political spirituality as a conceptual support for understanding liberation

theology and its fields of action in Latin America as a counter-conduct to the various authoritarian governments that were established in the region during the 1960s and 1970s.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS POLITICAL SPIRITUALITY

Between 1961 and 1965, the Second Vatican Council brought to the Catholic Church a necessary liturgical reformulation and a belated adjustment to the modern world. The so-called *aggiornamento* (updating) of the Church was intended to adapt Catholic doctrine to current times in order to maintain its social relevance. A few years later in 1968, the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate was convened in Medellín, Colombia to reflect on the impact of the Second Vatican Council on Latin American reality. Stressing the particularities of Latin America, especially poverty and economic dependence, the bishops in Medellín extended the concept of the Church of the Poor proposed by the council, insisting that the poor should not only be objects of Christian charity but also subjects of their own action and liberation. We can affirm that Medellín is the main line of provenance of *liberation theology*, perhaps the greatest Latin American contribution to theological thinking. Liberation theology has as its sign of emergence the book of the Peruvian friar Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, originally published in Spanish in 1971.²⁹

In Brazil, Medellín's reflections coincided with the hardening of the dictatorship through the publication of Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5) in 1968. AI-5 effectively promulgated a state of exception, allowing authorities to arbitrarily arrest "subver-

sives,” who were considered enemies of the regime. Throughout the succeeding ten years in which AI-5 was operative, practices of imprisonment, murder, and torture became commonplace in Brazil. As for the Church, it can be said that it was one of the great supporters of the coup of 1964, mainly through Tradition, Family and Property, an ultraconservative movement of Catholic inspiration. It actively participated with sectors of the middle class, small businessmen, and a part of the Brazilian clergy in the Family Marches with God for Freedom in the weeks prior to the coup of March 31.³⁰ However, this initial support for the regime was an expression of a sector of the Church that had seen its influence decline since the 1950s, especially among the popular strata, who converted to umbanda, Pentecostalism, or simply abandoned religion.³¹ Within the Catholic hierarchy, religious counter-conduct movements began to emerge. They acted directly in popular neighborhoods and the countryside to develop a leftist form of militancy that united laymen and young priests. These laymen and priests found in the Medellín discussions the theological vehicle for their actions in opposition to the military government. They were therefore sometimes arrested and tortured in the same way as the Marxist guerrillas.³²

Gradually, the Catholic opposition wing to the dictatorship gained importance to the point that in the early 1970s the Church could already be considered the greatest force of opposition to the regime. As the historian Ralph Della Cava noted, “In the absence of viable voluntary associations and political parties, the Churches in general and the Catholic in particular had by now [1973] become the single largest opposition force to military rule.”³³ From this perspective, Brazilian Catholicism

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can be thought of as a political spirituality in precisely the terms used by Foucault to analyze the Iranian revolution. It was a force that contested a government that was considered unjust. I propose, then, a sketch of liberation theology from the perspective of the three dimensions pointed out in the first section of this article: historical, religious, and subjective.

In terms of the historical dimension of liberation theology, it is necessary to highlight the geographical and temporal particularities of its appearance as a specific movement of contestation. Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in the 1970s, a period marked by a series of civilian-military coups and bloodthirsty dictatorships in the region, especially in Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. Michael Löwy points out that a convergence of factors created the conditions for the emergence of what he calls “Liberationist Christianity.” For him, this radical Christian line has its symbolic birth in January 1959, “at the moment when Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and their comrades marched into Havana, while in Rome John XXIII issued his first call for the convening of the Council.”³⁴ Liberationist Christianity was not a movement born in the hierarchy of the Church, which aimed objectively to maintain its influence over the poorer population, nor did it arise from the bottom up, simply out of popular uneasiness. For Löwy, the emergence of this religious current occurred in the movement from the periphery to the center, from marginal or peripheral movements in relation to the ecclesiastical institution, such as lay movements, religious orders, and foreign priests.³⁵

Moreover, the importance of the peripheral aspect of liberation theology lies not only within the institution but in also the fact that Latin America itself has always been on the periph-

ery of the global capitalist order. The Brazilian sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso and the Chilean economist Enzo Faletto made the latter point at the time. They were the creators of dependency theory, which exercised an enormous influence in the sociological thought of the left.³⁶ For Cardoso and Faletto, dependent capitalism would be one of the main factors responsible for maintaining social inequalities and poverty in Latin America. The vocabulary of dependency theory was soon absorbed by the religious movements of liberation, as can be seen in the declaration of principles of the Chilean movement Christians for Socialism:

The working class is still subject to exploitation and its attendant conditions: i.e., malnutrition, lack of housing, unemployment, and limited possibilities for further education and cultural development. The cause of this situation is specific and clear. It is the capitalist system, resulting from domination by foreign imperialism and maintained by the ruling classes of this country.

The system is characterized by private ownership of the means of production and by ever growing inequality in the distribution of income. It turns the worker into a mere cog in the production system, stimulates an irrational distribution of economic resources, and causes an improper transfer of surplus goods to foreign lands. The result is stagnation, which prevents our country from escaping its situation of underdevelopment. . . .

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The union of all workers, whatever their party loyalty may be, is critical at this juncture. Our country is being offered a unique opportunity to replace the existing system of dependent capitalism and to promote the cause of the laboring class throughout Latin America.³⁷

The “preferential option for the poor,” a formula set forth by the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in the Mexican city of Puebla in 1979, crystallizes in a few words liberation theology at the same time as it closes a historical cycle with the conservative rise begun by the election of Pope John Paul II. It produces a direct relationship between Latin American poverty and the class struggle as well as economic dependence. For friar Gutiérrez:

Development must attack the root causes of the problems and among them the deepest is economic, social, political, and cultural dependence of some countries upon others – an expression of the domination of some social classes over others. Attempts to bring about changes within the existing order have proven futile. This analysis of the situation is at the level of scientific rationality. Only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society – or at least allow that such a society might be possible.³⁸

Overcoming poverty and dependency would require concrete historical transformations, since the current social order would not allow the necessary liberation. For the Peruvian theologian, the concept of *liberation* is more comprehensive than development since it incorporates the lessons of the Gospels and advocates a radical change of the human experience in all its aspects. The religious dimension of the political spirituality of liberation theology is thus characterized by the possibility of theologically reinterpreting Christianity so that the proposal of social revolution is considered not only compatible with Catholic teaching but also its direct consequence. In the terms of Gutiérrez, “The class struggle is a fact that Christians cannot dodge and in the face of which the demands of the gospel must be clearly stated.”³⁹ In the formulation of the group Christians for Socialism the direct link between Christian faith and revolution appears even more explicitly:

The real-life presence of the faith in the very heart of revolutionary praxis provides for a fruitful interaction. *The Christian faith becomes a critical and dynamic leaven for revolution.* Faith intensifies the demand that the class struggle moves decisively towards the liberation of all men – in particular, those who suffer the most acute forms of oppression. . . . The specific nature of the Christian contribution should not be viewed as something prior to revolutionary praxis, as something readymade that the Christian brings with him to the revolutionary struggle. Rather, in the course of his real-life experience in that struggle, *faith reveals its capacity to provide creative contributions*

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which neither the Christian nor anyone else could have foreseen outside the revolutionary process. . . .

Christians involved in the process of liberation vividly come to realize that *the demands of revolutionary praxis force them to rediscover the central themes of the gospel message* – only now they are freed from their ideological dress.

The real context for a living faith today is the history of oppression and of the struggle for liberation from this oppression. To situate oneself within this context, however, one must truly participate in the process of liberation by joining parties and organizations that are authentic instruments of the struggle of the working class.⁴⁰

Although the Marxist vocabulary often seems to stand out from the theological work, it is necessary to emphasize the effort to reconcile Catholic doctrine with the concrete reality of Latin American poverty through the Marxist interpretation of capitalist society, considered as the most adequate theory for the needs of social transformation. The proposal of liberation theologians was to build a new Church that would enable the radical change necessary for the realization of the gospel. This task would require a personal commitment in the process of liberation, as indicated in the final section of the previous quote. Therein lies the subjective dimension of political spirituality, in which the so-called poor would become agents of their own liberation. In Brazil, the experience of the Ecclesiastic Base Communities (CEBs) was the main vehicle for personal transformation through community organizations that distrust-

ted major political projects and valued local initiatives such as cooperatives.⁴¹

The CEBs were the major instruments for articulating liberation theology in Brazil, and they were also spaces for political formation, since they were not under such fierce surveillance by the dictatorship, unlike other social spaces.⁴² At their peak, there were about eighty thousand communities, constituting the largest space for political evangelization in the country and influencing the formation of various social movements and political organizations that gained prominence in the political reopening process of the 1980s, such as the MST (Landless Workers' Movement), CUT (Trade-Union Confederation), and most importantly, the PT (Workers' Party).⁴³ During the dictatorship, the CEBs were a space of discussion and personal transformation, acting as substitutes for the political activities prohibited by the regime in the urban peripheries and rural areas. It would not be an exaggeration to affirm that the formation of the popular strata for the exercise of politics and citizenship during this period had a religious vocabulary as its main vehicle of realization.

Trying to understand liberation theology as political spirituality means affirming its potential for subjective transformation and its force of political contestation on the basis of the experience of religion as opposition to an unjust government. It means, in other words, understanding liberation theology as an active counter-conduct at a particular historical moment. What Foucault saw in Iran and later in Poland was also present in Brazil throughout more than a decade of intense struggles against the civil-military dictatorship.⁴⁴ As Löwy nicely sums up:

During the 1970s, after the wiping out of the underground Left, the Church appeared, in the eyes of civil society and of the military themselves, as the main adversary of the authoritarian state – a much more powerful (and radical) enemy than the tolerated (and tame) parliamentary opposition, the MDB, Brazilian Democratic Movement. Various social movements, in defence of human rights or of workers' and peasants' unions, found refuge under the Church's protective umbrella. Through the voice of its bishops, the Church criticized, in an increasingly direct and explicit way the violations of human rights and the absence of democracy. But that was not all: it also denounced the mode of development imposed by the military, its whole programme of 'modernization', as inhuman, unjust, and based on the social and economic oppression of the poor.⁴⁵

When analyzing the Iranian movement, Foucault clearly perceived that political spirituality is no guarantee that a fairer government will succeed what was being contested through a religious vocabulary.⁴⁶ As a counter-conduct, political spirituality does not amount to an immediate solution. It is much more of a will to conduct oneself in another way, a manner of refusing the governmentality of an unjust government.

Liberation theology lost much of its influence in the late 1970s. Within the Catholic hierarchy, John Paul II's rise to the papacy gradually rearranged the structure of the Church, gradually replacing the progressive bishops with conservative ones, especially in Latin America. The high point of this persecution was the censorship imposed on the eminent Brazilian

theologian Leonardo Boff in 1984 as well as the removal of his brother, the theologian Clodovis Boff. At the same time, the opening of the military regime and the revocation of AI-5 alongside the end of the ban on political parties brought into existence new social spaces of political articulation, thereby weakening the influence of Catholicism on many social strata. Besides, in spite of its radical Marxist position, liberation theology failed to be progressive in the field of morals and customs. It maintained a conservative position in relation to women's rights, sexuality, and contraceptive methods.⁴⁷ It thus moved away from the everyday experiences of the Brazilian population.

However, the importance of liberation theology as a political force, the organization of CEBs in Brazil as a social force, and the work of bishops such as Arns and Câmara cannot be denied. These bishops fought against various human rights violations committed by the dictatorship. They publicized arbitrary arrests and the torture of prisoners of the state. For more than a decade in Brazil, “a Igreja se fez povo” (the Church became the people).

CONCLUSION

During his visits to Iran, Foucault had the care and patience to interview actors from different segments of society. His engagement with these actors alongside his keen capacity for observation enabled him to write indispensable texts for understanding the uprisings against Shah Pahlavi. What caught Foucault's attention was the importance of the Islamic character of a revolt that in its origin was scattered and multifaceted. In one of his first published articles on the events in Iran,

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Foucault asks and answers the following question: “Do you know the phrase that makes the Iranians sneer the most, the one that seems to them the stupidest, the shallowest? ‘Religion is the opium of the people.’ Up to the time of the current dynasty, the mullahs preached with a gun at their side in the mosques.”⁴⁸ Religions here break with the role accorded to them in vulgar Marxism, where they would always be mystifying, pacifying, and preventing popular revolt through the control of subjectivities. For Foucault, there are clearly historical moments in which the religious vocabulary serves instead as a force of insurgency, as a subjective impulse for social transformation. He also recovers from Marx the complete passage in which the celebrated sentence appears, showing that there is almost always a forgotten ambiguity in it. Marx affirms, “The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”⁴⁹ Foucault adds, “Let’s say, then, that Islam, in that year of 1978, was not the opium of the people precisely because it was the spirit of a world without a spirit.”⁵⁰ He thus uses the concept of political spirituality to understand how a religious experience can stimulate and sustain revolt at historically specific junctures. Foucault’s conceptual apparatus in his Iranian writings can, then, be used to examine other moments in which religion served as a force of contestation. It served, as I have shown, as such a force through liberation theology, which fomented struggles against dictatorships throughout Latin America in the 1970s.

Like the Iranian Shiites, advocates of liberation theology saw no contradiction between their religion and Marxist ideas. In their founding statement, the Chilean bishops of Christians for Socialism declared:

As Christians we do not see any incompatibility between Christianity and socialism. Quite the contrary is true. As the Cardinal of Santiago said last November: 'There are more evangelical values in socialism than there are in capitalism.' The fact is that socialism offers new hope that man can be more complete, and hence more evangelical: i.e., more conformed to Jesus Christ, who came to liberate us from any and every sort of bondage.

Thus it is necessary to destroy the prejudice and mistrust that exist between Christians and Marxists.

To Marxists we say that authentic religion is not the opiate of the people. It is, on the contrary, a liberating stimulus to revivify and renew the world constantly.⁵¹

Many clerical and laic believers embraced the cause of fighting against the Brazilian dictatorship through the promise of constantly renewing the world. They did not see an obstacle to historical and subjective transformation in their faith, but, rather, the vehicle through which they could express their desires to behave in another way freed from the authoritarian yoke. With their struggles and their denunciations of abuses of power, they became one of the greatest forces of opposition to the regime, contributing to its closure and replacement by a democratic and free society. Their example continues to show us that it is never useless to revolt.

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NOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 2 For an analysis of the Foucault's visits to Brazil, see Heliana de Barros Conde Rodrigues, *Ensaio sobre Michel Foucault no Brasil: presença, efeitos, ressonâncias* (Rio de Janeiro: Lamparina, 2016).
- 3 José Castilho Marques Neto, "No táxi com Michel Foucault," *Revista Cult*, n. 225 (July 2017), 21-23.
- 4 For a report of the ceremony, see Elio Gaspari, *A ditadura encurralada*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Intrínseca, 2014), 196-197.
- 5 Arquidiocese de São Paulo, *Brasil: Nunca mais*, 41th ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2014).
- 6 For an in-depth analysis of Foucault's texts on Iran, see Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Marcelo Hoffman, *Foucault and Power: The Influence of Political Engagement on Theories of Power* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 93-121; Mauricio Aparecido Pelegrini, "Michel Foucault e a revolução Iraniana" (master's thesis, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2015).
- 7 Michel Foucault, "What Are the Iranians Dreaming [*Révent*] About?," in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 208-209, italics in the original.
- 8 Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 3, *Power*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 233. Julien Cavagnis notes that although the round table took place in May (before the voyages to Iran), Foucault completely revised the text for publication in 1980. Therefore, it is very likely that the expression "political spirituality" was added after the discussion. On this point, see Julien Cavagnis, "Michel Foucault et le soulèvement iranien de 1978: retour sur la notion de 'spiritualité politique,'" *Cahiers Philosophiques*, n. 130 (2012): 51-71.
- 9 Foucault, "What Are the Iranians Dreaming [*Révent*] About?," 207.

- 10 Ibid., 208.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Michel Foucault, “Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit,” in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 255.
- 13 Michel Foucault, “Tehran: Faith against the Shah,” in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 200-201.
- 14 Michel Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 3, *Power*, 451.
- 15 Phillipe Chevallier, “La spiritualité politique, Michel Foucault et l’Iran,” *Projet*, n. 281 (2004): 79-80, <http://www.revue-projet.com/articles/2004-4-la-spiritualite-politique-michel-foucault-et-l-iran/>.
- 16 Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?,” 449.
- 17 Julien Cavagnis, “L’Islam chi’ite et la révolte: réflexions sur l’approche foucauldienne des sources religieuses du soulèvement iranien de 1978”, *Rodéo*, n. 2 (2013), 61, italics in the original.
- 18 Ibid., 64.
- 19 Ibid., italics in the original.
- 20 Foucault, “What Are the Iranians Dreaming [*Révent*] About?,” 206.
- 21 Cavagnis, “L’Islam chi’ite et la révolte,” 66, brackets added.
- 22 Ibid., 66.
- 23 Julien Cavagnis, “Michel Foucault et le soulèvement iranien de 1978,” 70.
- 24 Foucault, “Iran,” 255.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid., 260.
- 27 Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?,” 451-452.
- 28 Foucault, “Questions of Method,” 233.
- 29 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (New York: Orbis, 1973).

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- 30 See Elio Gaspari, *A Ditadura Envergonhada*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Intrínseca, 2014); Jorge Ferreira and Angela de Castro Gomes, *1964: O golpe que derrubou um presidente, pôs fim ao regime democrático e instituiu a ditadura no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2014).
- 31 Eder Sader, *Quando novos personagens entraram em cena: experiências e lutas dos trabalhadores da Grande São Paulo, 1970-1980* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1988), 150.
- 32 Ibid., 151. An auxiliary of Dom Hélder Câmara was kidnapped and martyred with his body exposed by his killers.
- 33 Ralph Della Cava, “The ‘People’s Church’, the Vatican, and *Abertura*”, in *Democratizing Brazil: Problems of Transition and Consolidation*, ed. Alfred Stepan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 147, brackets added.
- 34 Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (New York: Verso, 1996), 41.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 See Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).
- 37 Christians For Socialism Movement, “Declaration of The 80 (April 16, 1971),” in *Christians and Socialism: Documentation of the Christians For Socialism Movement in Latin America*, ed. John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1975), 3-5.
- 38 Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 57.
- 39 Ibid., 192.
- 40 Christians For Socialism Movement, “Final Document of the Convention (April 30, 1972),” in *Christians and Socialism*, 172-173, italics mine.
- 41 Löwy, *War of Gods*, 62.
- 42 Della Cava, “‘People’s Church’, the Vatican, and *Abertura*”, 149-150.
- 43 Löwy, *War of Gods*, 81.

- 44 Chevallier, “Spiritualité politique – Michel Foucault et l’Iran,” 82; Michel Foucault, “The Moral and Social Experience of the Poles Can No Longer Be Obliterated,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 3, *Power*, 465-473; Hoffinan, *Foucault and Power*, 123-147.
- 45 Löwy, *War of Gods*, 87.
- 46 Michel Foucault, “Il ne peut pas y avoir de sociétés sans soulèvements’ – Entretien avec Farès Sassine,” *Rodéo*, n. 2 (2013), 34-56.
- 47 Löwy, *War of Gods*, 53. For a feminist approach of theology, see Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002). For the trajectory of the feminist theologian Ivone Gebara, her formation in the theology of liberation and her persecution by the Vatican, see Margareth Rago, *A aventura de contar-se: Feminismos, escrita de si e invenções da subjetividade* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2013).
- 48 Foucault, “Tehran,” 201.
- 49 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 131.
- 50 Foucault, “Iran,” 255.
- 51 Christians For Socialism Movement, “Declaration of The 80 (April 16, 1971),” 4.