Evaluate how methods, philosophies and contexts of historians affect changing perspectives on the nature of the Iranian Revolution

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Synopsis
I am an adherent of the view that history creates the historian. A topic such as the nature of the Iranian Revolution is naturally contested, for its complexity and ambiguity. There are cogent historical reasons for this, but it is inescapable that much of the divide in the argument comes from the methods, philosophies and contexts that construct a historian's views and the way they are presented. My inquiry is thus concerned with which ways these factors impinge upon the perspectives each historian presents – “Examine how methods, philosophies and contexts affect changing perspectives on the Iranian Revolution”. I have chosen three main historians, Foucault, Edward Said and Bernard Lewis, because they exemplify this well. The direct and sometimes jarring contradictions they offered to each others' views served as a powerful material to explore how the varying contexts, philosophies and methods created and fuelled the changing perspectives. Yet I felt such an investigation was in some ways a blinkered and narrow understanding of the Revolution. I have aimed to diversify my investigation for several reasons. I am enduringly fascinated by the power of political ideology; I also thought that I had neglected to give much of a role to less dominant voices. Through an examination of how subsequent political upheavals such as the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ are analysed in the light of the Revolution, I wanted to give my project nuances that would make it more readily applicable to the issues that face our world today. My findings are framed around the idea of revolutions for this reason, for disputes are common to many historical topics, but even more avidly when discussing the major shifts in political power, which a revolution is. It is apparent that wherever ambiguity exists, such as in the case of the Iranian Revolution, historiography must examine above all, ‘Who is the historian?’

Essay
The protean nature of revolutions remains unclear for decades or even centuries after the event. As a result, they are constantly reshaped by the impact of external and personal forces. The view and legacy of a revolution is highly contested depending on the philosophies, methods and particularly, the contexts of individual historians, whose constructions of history cannot but rest upon these foundations. The case study of the Iranian Revolution is one such example whose assessment is characterised by contradictory points of view, including those of Michel Foucault, Edward Said and Bernard Lewis. Particularly, its implications for further political upheaval in the Middle East, such as the 2011 Arab Spring, remain highly disputed as the Iranian Revolution is increasingly seen as the ‘locus classicus’ of discussion relating to Islamism as a whole.

Michel Foucault, noted French postmodernist philosopher, approached the topic of the Iranian Revolution with zeal and enthusiasm. A series of articles on the Iranian Revolution, written contemporaneously across late 1978 and early 1979, emphasised his belief in the organic and authentic nature of the revolution as a reaction against modernisation. Paradoxically, the revolution’s embrace of modern technologies and dissemination techniques countered the seeming return to a supposed Islamic state that had existed before the imposition of the Pahlavi monarchy. Foucault’s views on the nature of history are implicitly reflected within his articles, particularly “A Powder Keg Called Islam”. The only one of his articles written post-Revolution, it discusses the unprecedented nature of the Revolution and the future pervasiveness of Islamist ideology – “Thus, it is true that, as an ‘Islamic’ movement, it can set the entire region afire, overturn the most unstable regimes, and disturb the most solid ones.”
Foucault's embrace of the Iranian Revolution reflects the particular methods, philosophies and contexts, which worked to construct his history and his perspectives. Foucault's seminal postmodern and poststructuralist writings were directly reflected in these commentaries. Foucault's wish to 'push the bounds of rationality'^4 in human experience and his views of his philosophies transcended academic divides led to his enthusiastic support for 'political spirituality';^4 i.e., the growing politicisation of religious revivals particularly in non-Western nations. Edward Said critiques this support as an Orientalist tendency of Foucault's. Despite these beliefs, Foucault tended to defy labelling and indeed his philosophies have varied widely. One example is Foucault's disavowal of his beliefs in the power of 'political spirituality' as his idealism manifested failed during the course of the Iranian Revolution.

Foucault's decision to publicise his views in the social liberal newspapers Corriere della Sera and Le Nouvel Observateur enabled a more practical application of his philosophical views. Foucault's opinions could thus be used as a toolbox for social activism and as a lightning rod for ideas to spread due to their popularisation in mass media. Indeed, they mirror the use of modern technologies and media in the Iranian Revolution. "If the shah is about to fall, it will be due largely to the cassette tape. It is the tool par excellence of communication."^6 Furthermore, as his writings ran in tandem with the events themselves, an undrafted and authentic voice could emerge from these writings.

The cultural and temporal milieu in which Foucault existed had a significant contextual impact upon his writings. The influence of Maoist thought, which swept through the French intelligentsia in the 1960s dramatically, shifted his theoretical approach. These theories were combined with the student riots in Paris in the summer of 1968 to have a tangible impact on Foucault's expression, as they seemed to translate his philosophies to a directly applicable, concrete and practicable manifestation. His previous focus on the aesthetic in philosophy shifted to a greater belief in the power of political activism to create change. This activist nature is again reflected in the commentaries on the Iranian Revolution. His belief in the catalytic, electrifying sway of Ayatollah Khomeini showed that the Iranian Revolution was in fact superior to Paris 1968, as this time, the revolt had a guide, a pathway, ideological and political viability. The excitement of being caught up in the moment of revolution however blinded him to an objective analysis of its implications in following years. Foucault was simply too close in time to the Revolution to see its full impact: the religious persecutions and political terror that would ensue.

Edward Said, once not dissimilar ideologically to Foucault, diverged from that position by the publication of Orientalism in 1978. His writings on the Iranian Revolution were characterised by a debt avoidance of any objective assessment of its nature. Instead, Said criticised a tendency in Western media to present the Revolution as exemplifying an Islamicity antithetical to the West. This was compounded by the power that the media has in shaping collective consciousness. According to Said, Western writers drew a sharp dichotomy between good and evil, "a cosmic drama pitting civilization as we like it against the uncivilized and barbaric".^9 Said drew parallels between this particular case study and his theory of Orientalism - "for the West, to understand Islam has meant trying to convert its variety into a monolithic undeveloping essence".^10 This strongly differentiated viewpoint stems from Said's methods, philosophies and context.

Said's theory of 'worldliness'[^11] - that all academic disciplines are fundamentally interlinked - combined with his theory of the 'public intellectual' to demonstrate his belief that an intellectual should be able to voice opinions on any field of thought and to a broad audience.^12 Said criticised a growing professionalisation of intellectuals - to him, professionals were "conformist [and] encourage a reliance on a superior little band of all-knowing men in power".^3 Instead, Said fits Gramsci's idea of the 'organic intellectual'[^14] and his writings on the Revolution were a demonstration of his desire to act as a representative of wider Arab community concerns. It would thus be necessary to be an amateur to "speak truth to power"^13 and to represent a community that was frequently powerless.

Said's theory of 'worldliness' was sparked by his own contextual hybridity and heterogeneity. His personal context indelibly affected his identity. Born to a Palestinian Christian family, he was brought up in Alexandria then spent the majority of his life in the West. This caused a cultural displacement where he was fully accepted neither by Arabs or the West. Thus, a sense of loss based on his ethno-cultural background has built into a desire to syncretise these identities: a desire that created a restless, exilic marginality in his writings. Said sought to speak as a
Palestinian nationalist and postcolonialist because of his disconnection from his roots: a desire mirrored by other Palestinian-Americans, whose divided diaspora and lack of a homeland engendered an uncommon pride. The effect of Said's position as Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University upon his writings was to ground them in an understanding of the power of language and shifting discourses to shape and reshape meaning, directly leading to his critique of the insidious power of Western media.

Said's postmodernism and poststructuralism affected his writings in a different way to Foucault: it led him instead to critique the grand narratives and ideologies which had been imposed upon interpretations of the Revolution, rather than to directly engage with what the Revolution entailed. His writings are best characterised by postcolonialism, as outlined in his best-known work Orientalism. Said's determination to expose the neocolonial nature of such media was created by such a philosophy, particularly by concerns over the marginalisation of the authentic voice. However, it led him to imprudently ignore the notion of the revolution as Islamic.

Bernard Lewis' perspective on the Iranian Revolution is quite different to the postmodern, poststructural views of Foucault and Said. Like them, Lewis believes in the enduring resonance of the Revolution: that it was a major shift in economic and political power; and that, like the French and Russian Revolutions, it "still has a long way to go before it works itself out." However, in Islamic Revolution, he argues that Islam served as the inspiration, the "common heritage of usable allusions and symbols" that is necessary to bind any revolution. It is the most effective system for mobilising public opinion, he says, quoting Khomeini: "Islam is politics or it is nothing," and in particular singles out how the most negative aspects of the revolution such as fanaticism and terror are inspired by Islamic holy texts.

Born to a Jewish family, Lewis studied Oriental Studies at the University of London, graduating in 1936. His intellectual upbringing in the cradle of institutionalised Western study of the East continued during his postgraduate studies at the University of Paris Sorbonne. This formative period in his life amidst Judeo-Christian influences would lead to a study of Islam in terms of comparative religion, shown in Islamic Revolution, when he compares what he sees to be revolutions in the Western tradition such as the French and Russian, with the Iranian. It was written a decade after the events it describes, thus Lewis had a better recognition of the autocratic, theocratic nature of the new state and its continuing stranglehold on government. Yet this time also allows greater susceptibility to the continual reshaping of collective consciousness about Islam by Western media, as described by Said. These contextual factors combine to create an intellectual frequently lambasted for being 'Orientalist'.

Lewis' views have been significantly influenced by his philosophies, particularly that of conservatism and neoconservatism, the inherent belief of which is that change in society is a sign of decline and decay. This reactionary approach is demonstrated through Lewis' championing of the West as an ideological fortress, and consequent reductionist view of Islamic societies. An avowed Zionist, he was a founding member of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, but formed a breakaway organisation, criticising MESA's drift towards criticising Israel and America's role in the Middle East. This philosophy has fed his antipathy to the more violent aspects of Islam, shown where Lewis continually presents the Iranian revolutionaries as the 'other': "When we in the Western world ... this is not so in the Islamic world."22

Lewis' methods have been hotly debated for their legitimacy. Lewis, like Said and Foucault, is a public intellectual, publishing his views in establishment forums such as Islamic Revolution in Time magazine and the Jefferson and Irving Kristol lectures. Lewis' appeal to a Western, educated and conservative heartland has been challenged in its methodology. Amongst others, Mazin Motabbagani, a professor at King Saud University, criticises Lewis' use of non-specialist sources, generalisations about Islamic jurisprudence, selectivity of sources for his own purposes, and tendency to suspect the validity of the Koran as authentic religious scripture.23 This "vein of scholarly objectivity" has ensured Lewis continues to remain accepted and influential within the intellectual mainstream.

The continuing resonance of the Iranian Revolution can be seen in the multitude of reactions to the 2011 'Arab Spring'. Iran 1979 has become the 'locus classicus' of a historiographical movement, the seminal Islamic revolution by which other such upheavals are adjudicated. The Revolution's very significance lies in the fact that its effects remain unclear yet so seemingly relevant to contemporary concerns. It is embedded
within the collective consciousness as the signifier of Islamism. This allows each historian to reinterpret the facts of the Revolution to depict perspectives informed by the contexts, methods and philosophies of a new age of revolt.

The 'Arab Spring' has created and has been created by a group of reactions characterised by diversity and organicity, many of whom have used the history of the Iranian Revolution to support their own contemporary political viewpoints. The frequency and availability of communications has grown exponentially, and the resultant multiplicity of opinions and interpretations has radically redefined the way people respond to history. Most pertinently, this history in itself, to some extent shapes current events and perpetuates political upheaval. The role of Islam in government was redefined in the very country that had championed it. The 2009 Iranian election protests — the so-called 'green revolution' — fostered a new discourse of Islam that lacked the fundamentalism of the theocracy, and around that discourse reshaped the understanding of the Revolution itself. The use of the platforms of social media and the knowledge that their ideas would be broadcast to a global audience engendered a growing willingness to voice open dissent, a willingness previously lacking in the Arab world. This is demonstrated by the role that online activists took in fostering the January 25 protests in Egypt this year, an activism fostered by 'collaborating content'.

This growth in grassroots history and activism, together with philosophical changes such as a growth in pluralism and relativism, is shifting the approach of the West away from a reductive approach to political Islam. There is a growing capability amongst historians to differentiate between the fundamentalist, authoritarian Islamism practiced by the Iranian theocracy, and the Islamic politicians seeking to advance their agenda through democracy. This is particularly evident in a 2011 interview of Lewis, who contrasts autochthonous, limited political freedom where “consultation is the magic word” with what he describes as the illusory politics of Islamists such as Khomeini and the Muslim Brotherhood. Olivier Roy, a French liberal thinker, has a more optimistic take on the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in a democratic world, emphasising that they lack "the kind of repressive apparatus that exists in Iran". Changing perspectives may shift the community's or even an individual's perspective on ideas, but it remains that historians continue to reference contemporary Arab events in counterpoint to the Iranian Revolution.

Revolution are contested events by nature, for such a major socio-political shift is profoundly unclear in its consequences and legacy. This is seen in sharp clarity when examining the Iranian Revolution. It is an event that is yet to run its full course; historians have no consensus over its implications. Such ambiguity allows individuals to impose their own interpretations. Thus the revolution is historised and re-historicised within the ideological continuum of Islamism, inevitably according to each historian's contexts, philosophies and methods.

Endnotes
1 They were commissioned for the Italian newspaper Corriere Della Sera. Foucault also published articles in the French progressive newspaper Le Nouvel Observateur. I have sourced these articles from the appendices of Janet Afary's book Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism.
2 Foucault, Michel. The Revolution In Iran Spreads On Cassette Tapes, Corriere Della Sera, November 19 1978.
5 Ibid.
6 Foucault, Michel. The Revolution In Iran Spreads On Cassette Tapes, Corriere Della Sera, November 19 1978.
7 Foucault's intellectual milieu was deeply impressed by the Cultural Revolution and, motivated by utopian ideals, moved to create grassroots social movements to shift from the conservatism which had marked post-war France. Richard Wolin argues in The Wind from the East (2010) that these activists had little real understanding of Chinese politics, instead instigating a social democratic "sea change".
8 Whilst the Paris riots had ended in ignominious inaction, the grasping of the initiative and the resumption of power by the government of de Gaulle, the Iranian Revolution presented a more propitious opportunity for the real-world fulfillment of Foucault's philosophies.
12 This is indicated by his decision to publish his Iranian articles in a public forum, such as in the publications Time Magazine and Columbia Journalism Review, and his deliverance of the 1993 Reith Lecture series, entitled Representations of the Intellectual.
Gramsci's idea of the 'organic intellectual' described an individual who drew their views from an 'organic' source within their community.


An example of this is his co-editing of *Blaming the victims: spurious scholarship and the Palestinian question* (2001) with Christopher Hitchens.


**Bibliography**


Highlights include:

- Exploring the ancient wats of Laos’ ancient capital, Luang Prabang.
- Being the first of your friends to touch the giant stone jars at Phonsavan in Laos.
- Touring the complex at Angkor, including Angkor Wat and Ta Prohm.
- Spending a day with the Greater Angkor Project archaeologists – a unique experience!
- Visiting the Killing Fields and Tuol Sleng (S.21) in Phnom Penh.
- Enjoying the company of like-minded lovers of history.

Tour leader, Denis Mootz, will hold two workshops during the tour to enhance teacher knowledge, share resources and provide opportunities for collegial discussion.

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