

REVIEW

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution and the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), ISBN: 978-0-8166-9949-0.

As a “philosopher-journalist” for *Corriere della Sera* Michel Foucault witnessed and covered events in Iran in the fall of 1978 as the protests against the Pahlavi-regime were reaching their highpoint. He was impressed by what he saw on the streets of Tehran and supported the cause of the revolting masses in a number of articles and interviews. At the time, Foucault’s positive appreciation of the religiously marked movement led by Ayatollah Khomeini caused controversy in France.¹ Later on, his writings have often been dismissed as a display of “infantile leftism”² or, at least, as a serious error of judgment. There are, nevertheless, also more sympathetic readings arguing that even if Foucault’s account suffered from his limited knowledge about Iran and Shi’i Islam, he cannot be condemned for having admired the courage of people revolting against a despicable regime.³ On the whole, however, Foucault scholars usually just ignore his writings on Iran because they are presumed to be theoretically insignificant and of little consequence for the development of his later thinking. In his *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi suggests otherwise. Evoking Susan Buck-Morss’ “Hegel and Haiti”, he argues that even if never acknowledged, it was more than anything else the encounter with the revolutionary movement in Iran that made Foucault center on the question of the subject in his late oeuvre.⁴ The political spirituality of the revolutionary subjects was the origin of his philosophy of truth-telling, critique and care of the self. To substantiate his claim, Ghamari-Tabrizi offers us a historically grounded reading of Foucault’s late writings, highlighting and emphasizing the connections to his articles and interviews on Iran. Even if he doesn’t quite succeed to convince that the Iranian revolution was the context *par excellence* for the development of Foucault’s thinking on the subject, he shows how the Iran-texts fit into his late concerns and work.

¹ Cf. Janet Afary and Kevin B. Andersen, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (2005).

² Michael Walzer, “The Politics of Michel Foucault,” in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Hoy (1986), 51.

³ Cf. e.g. Michiel Leezenberg, “Power and political spirituality: Michel Foucault on the Islamic Revolution in Iran,” in *Michel Foucault and the Politics of Religious Experience*, ed. James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (1998); Bonnie Honig, “What Foucault Saw at the Revolution: On the Use and Abuse of Theology for Politics,” *Political Theory* 36:2 (2008), 301-312.

⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26:4 (2000), 821-865.

Foucault in Iran is, however, not only a book about Foucault. It is also a thought-out rejection of what the author calls “Enlightenment rationalist fundamentalism” in approaching the Iranian revolution, Islamism, or more generally, any political event or phenomenon in the Middle East.⁵ Such fundamentalism, Ghamari-Tabrizi suggests, insists on a binary divide between secular and Islamist politics and subjects the present moment to historical necessities, which precludes the possibility that something might be contingent or novel. The author stages his criticism of this approach mainly through a systematic attack on the only book which had been devoted to Foucault’s texts on Iran prior to the publication of his own, namely Janet Afary’s and Kevin B. Anderson’s 2005 *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seduction of Islam*. In the process, Ghamari-Tabrizi also manages to renegotiate the memories, popular narratives, discursive framings and historiographies of the Iranian revolution, because in the end “how one assesses Foucault’s writings on the Iranian Revolution depends on the narrative through which one tells the story of the revolution and its outcome.”⁶

In their book, Afary and Anderson suggested that (what they read as) Foucault’s “uncritical embrace of the Iranian ayatollahs” should not be seen as an isolated mistake or as something caused by his limited knowledge of Iranian history, society and politics.⁷ Instead, they argue that his Iran-texts are best explained by the preference for an idealized premodern past (including traditional gender roles) and the fascination for pain, death and “limit experiences” that they, through a mix of insinuation and contiguity, attribute to him.⁸ Enthralled with exotic Shi’i rituals, Foucault failed to notice that the revolutionary movement had liberal and leftist factions too. His disdain for enlightenment values and modernity made him sympathetic towards the Islamists of the movement, disregarding that they had authoritarian and violent inclinations and targeted religious and ethnic minorities and women. The moral of the story that Afary and Anderson tell is that refusal to commit to transcendental and universal norms will lead to absurd political positions and alliances.

Ghamari-Tabrizi objects that Afary and Andersen write as if it was already clear during the fall of 1978 was clear that the revolutionary mass-movement would result in the authoritarian and violent regime that by the early 1980s had consolidated its grip on the country. For them, as for many others, secularism and progressiveness go together and radical Islamism can only lead to the terror and repression that indeed did follow the Iranian revolution. Ghamari-Tabrizi highlights that Foucault, in contrast, approached the revolution as a singularity and a novelty, the outcome of which would neither be given by already recognized patterns of revolutionary change (whether of the liberal or Marxist type) nor by religious scripts. Foucault’s point of view will, however, appear incomprehensible if we don’t realize that the Islam of the revolutionary movement was something different from the Islam that came to be institutionalized by the post-

⁵ Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution and the Enlightenment* (2016), 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

revolutionary regime. The former was, on the one hand, a feature of the popular cultural legacy, which offered a shared, but vague and ambiguous, idiom of social justice to the heterogeneous forces frustrated by the Pahlavi-regime and allowed “massive numbers of peoples” to identify with the anti-Shah movement. The Shi’ism of the movement was, on the other hand, a form of liberation theology, as developed by Ali Shari’ati, who, drawing on existentialism, socialism, and Third-Worldism, reinterpreted Shi’ism as a permanent struggle against oppression. Foucault treated these Islams, which did not carry a blueprint for the future, as a source of creative possibilities. It was only after the revolution, Ghamari-Tabrizi underscores, that a group of Khomeini’s hardline supporters substituted these indeterminate Islams of negation with an affirmative, prescriptive, juridical and doctrinal Islam, which was to serve as the foundation of the state.

Defending Foucault’s depiction of the revolutionary movement as Islamic and as unified, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues that the plurality of forces taking part in the revolution were nonetheless *one* movement because they were brought together by Shi’ite traditions, discourses and rituals and by the leadership of Khomeini. Revisiting the Iranian oppositional culture of the 1960s and 1970s, he highlights that this was a time and a place in which the secular/religious divide was not politically decisive. During the fall/winter of 1978-79, the Iranian liberal and leftist organizations never defined their objectives in purely secular terms and that they endorsed Khomeini’s leadership based on their common anti-shah and anti-imperialist positions, but also because no political group could at the time join the rising revolutionary movement without doing so. The period of symbolic appropriation of Islam by a diverse spectrum of political parties and social groups came to an end after the victory of the revolution, when different political groups clashed over what form the post-revolutionary order should take. The unifying role of Islam during the revolutionary process itself has later been distorted not only by outside observers who presuppose a “natural” secular/religious divide in politics, but also by the two sides of the post-revolutionary power struggle: both the winning side, which came to dominate the state institutions, and the losing side, which was subjected to mass-executions and mass-imprisonments in the name of Islam, came in retrospect to present the theocracy that was established as the inevitable outcome of an Islamic revolution.

Ghamari-Tabrizi suggests in addition that the post-revolutionary violence and repression that came to pass was not part of the self-evident agenda of the Islamists who took hold of state power, and was therefore not foreseeable to all but those allegedly blinded by Shi’ite exoticism. The terror was instead the response of the politically inexperienced religious establishment to a specific set of post-revolutionary challenges. They resorted to an extensive use of the newly conquered repressive apparatus of the state when confronted with a number of serious threats to their new power position: strong political rivals with opposing agendas, labor riots encouraged and assisted by the Marxists, radical, and perhaps unrealizable, social demands made by the lowest strata of society, and discontent and unrest in areas dominated by ethnic minorities (most importantly in Kurdistan). In addition, Ghamari-Tabrizi highlights the use and promotion of vio-

lence by the militant Islamomaxist and Marxist opposition groups as one of the factors leading up to the terror unleashed by the Islamic Republic.

Ghamari-Tabrizi's willingness and careful effort to do justice to the winning side of the postrevolutionary power struggle (without in any way excusing the indiscriminate violence unleashed towards members and sympathizers of opposition groups) will appear striking for those who have read his prison memoirs *Remembering Akbar: Inside the Iranian Revolution* (2016), which was published about the same time as *Foucault in Iran*. In that book we meet the author as a young committed Marxist-Leninist student partaking in the revolution and later suffering through "the realpolitik of the postrevolutionary state" in the form of torture and several years of imprisonment in deplorable conditions.⁹ Ghamari-Tabrizi states early on in *Foucault in Iran* that he will not write the book from the perspective of a participant but instead re-situate his experiences in a wider context, re-evaluate the historical significance he previously attributed to his revolutionary milieu, and try to meaningfully navigate "the volatile terrains of memory, myth, ideology, and history."¹⁰ The book still benefits from its author being an insider of the revolution, among other things because he is able to include details from the Iranian oppositional culture of the 1960s and 1970s, making his narrative come alive (the defense speech of a Marxist poet about to be executed emphasizing the proximity of Islam and Socialism, the open letter of a leftist anti-imperialist female author in March 1979 urging women not to fail the revolution by focusing on women's issues, ...).

Foucault in Iran privileges the defense of Foucault's anti-teleological approach to the revolution over a critical engagement with his account, but the latter is not missing completely. Ghamari-Tabrizi highlights that Foucault wrote on Iran, like Fanon on Algeria, from a position of sympathy and solidarity with a movement in a country about which he had limited knowledge and the language of which he did not speak. He, like Fanon, also underestimated the way in which the weight of the past would burden the present and failed to notice how the very revolutionary energy he was witnessing could "revert into fueling a repressive state machine."¹¹ Echoing a point previously made by Leezenberg,¹² he also suggests that Foucault was disposed to neglect the "deeply rooted networks and ethos of legalistic and doctrinal Islam that would eventually dominate the post-revolutionary state politics" because what he actually had read about Islam and Shi'ism had been focused on the minor traditions of mysticism and Sufism.¹³ To some extent, a similar problem appears in *Foucault in Iran* itself. The book doesn't devote much space to discussing the place and role of legalistic and doctrinal Shi'ism in the revolutionary movement, which makes it difficult to understand how that form of Islam came to ascendancy after the revolution. One of the effects of this marginalization is the easiness with which Ghamari-Tabrizi can disregard the fears of a "Westernized" Iranian woman, a certain Atoussa H., with whom Foucault had a brief exchange in November

⁹ Behrooz Ghamari, , *Remembering Akbar: Inside the Iranian Revolution* (2016), 189.

¹⁰ Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, xi.

¹¹ Ibid. 73.

¹² Leezenberg, "Power and political spirituality".

¹³ Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 73-74.

1978, about what an Islamic government might entail for her, and instead, just like Foucault had done before him, focus solely on the Orientalist assumptions appearing in her text. This critique should, however, not distract from the fact that *Foucault in Iran* is a bold and original work, which destabilizes prevalent assumptions about the 1979-revolution and Foucault's interpretation of it by offering a concrete, contextually based, and historically specific analysis. On top of this, the book is also beautifully narrated, showing the author's talent for telling stories and writing.

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