

REVIEW

Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005). ISBN 0226007863

On the cover of *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* is a portrait of Foucault in profile. He is wearing glasses and much of his face and head is cast in shadow, dark, and stylized. At first glance, in fact, it could be taken as an image of Malcolm X, not Foucault. The juxtaposition (inadvertent or otherwise) is apt, and it suggests an interesting parallel between these two figures—both were attracted by the potentially liberating possibilities within Islam; and, for each, a journey to the Middle East to explore those possibilities marked a turning point in his career. In Foucault's case, two 1978 trips to Iran yielded more than a dozen articles in the Italian and French press about the growing revolutionary movement against the Shah, and coincided with important shifts in his broader philosophical agenda. The time is ripe for a reassessment of Foucault's impressions of Iran, and Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson's new book does important work toward this end.

This volume really constitutes two books published together. The first book is Afary and Anderson's critical analysis of Foucault's engagement with Iran; the second book is the appendix, translations of Foucault's texts on Iran as well as several other pieces translated from French, most of which appear in English for the first time. Since it makes sense to understand Foucault's perspective on Iran before considering Afary and Anderson's assessments of it, I shall first discuss the appendix. (And for the same reason, I would recommend that readers begin with the appendix—or at least Foucault's essays—before turning to Afary and Anderson's text). 100 pages long, the appendix could well have been published as a stand-alone monograph.

Foucault on Iran

Foucault made two trips to Iran in 1978. The first, in September, came shortly after "Black Friday" when several thousand people died after the army fired shots into a crowd. The second, in November, followed the "Tehran weekend" in which symbols of the Pahlavi regime were burned. Foucault met with many people while there, including several leading opposition clerics, and

was able to arrange meetings with Iranian exiles—including Ayatollah Khomeini—upon his return to France.

The appendix begins with an interview, previously available only in Persian, that Foucault gave to Baqir Parham during his first visit to Iran, followed by Foucault's published articles on Iran. Most of these initially appeared in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. The appendix includes all but one of the *Corriere della Sera*/Iran pieces—the omitted essay (also omitted from *Dits et Écrits*) appeared in expanded form in the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* (and the expanded version is included in the appendix). (Foucault published one further essay in *Corriere della Sera*, an introduction to a related series that, while it did not address Iran directly, does help to situate his work on Iran. Its omission from the appendix is puzzling, as Afary and Anderson quote from it on page 3.) In addition to his series in the Italian press, Foucault also published several pieces in the French press, all of which are included. The appendix also includes an article and a letter to the editor published in response to Foucault (and his replies), as well as several other documents and a series of articles on Foucault and Iran by Maxime Rodinson, a scholar of the Middle East.

Clearly emerging in these essays and interviews are a number of themes that were central to Foucault's thought in the mid-1970s—resistance to state power, the role of the intellectual, contrasts (however facile) between East and West—but also several new ideas that will figure in his thought in the 1980s: "political spirituality," critique as a positive ethical project, and a sense of hope. Particularly important among these essays are four: "Tehran: faith against the Shah," and "The mythical leader of the Iranian revolt" from *Corriere della Sera*; "What are the Iranians dreaming about?" from *Le Nouvel Observateur*; and the interview with Baqir Parham, translated from Persian. The reasons for his interest in Iran are perhaps best expressed in *Le Nouvel Observateur*:

At the dawn of history, Persia invented the state and conferred its models on Islam But from this same Islam, it derived a religion that gave to its people infinite resources to resist state power. In this will for an "Islamic government," should one see a reconciliation, a contradiction, or the threshold of something new? (208, cf. 203)

Foucault's September 1978 conversation with Iranian intellectual Baqir Parham contextualizes his interest in Iran in terms of his other philosophical and intellectual concerns, such as the role of the specific intellectual. But he also raises a new tension—the possibility that critique could be a positive, and not merely negative, project—and a hope that "we ought to have the courage to begin anew" (185) with such a positive project. "We have to construct another political thought, another political imagination, and teach anew the

vision of a future" (185). Foucault sees Iran (however naïvely) as a case study in the possibilities for such a political imagination. He frames this task, and the Iranian revolt, in terms of opposition to "this monstrosity we call the state" (185). And he sees contemporary Shi'ism in Iran as analogous to European Protestantism during the Reformation: it is both a religious movement and a political movement—more importantly, it is a movement of opposition against the hegemonies of the day. If Foucault does history of the past in order to do the history of the present, then it seems that he does journalism of the non-Western in order to do a history of the West.

Emphasizing the important role of Shi'ism in the revolt, Foucault simultaneously displays both an insightful analysis of and a naïve optimism about the events in Iran. He acutely understands how Shi'ism is able to organize the resistance into a unified force that could effectively oppose the Shah. Nevertheless, he is too willing to believe that Shi'ism offers real alternatives to state power: "Among the Shi'ite clergy, religious authority is not determined by a hierarchy.... They were *listened to*.... [Their power] essentially resides in the interplay of speaking and listening." (202). Foucault was struck by the unified collective will that he experienced in his visits—a will with one aim, the end of the Shah's regime. Seeing that Shi'ism focused this will, Foucault hoped that it would have positive consequences: that "Islamic government" would avoid hierarchies and protect liberties (which the Shah's regime did not), and that it "would allow the introduction of a spiritual dimension into political life" (207)—political spirituality. And while he indicated how the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini was able to become a unifying symbol for the revolt ("*Khomeini is not there... Khomeini says nothing, nothing other than no—to the shah, to the regime, to dependency. Finally, Khomeini is not a politician.*"), he was sorely mistaken about the character of this charismatic (Foucault says "almost mythical") figure: "There will not be a Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government" (222).

In Foucault's study of Iran, a hopeful enthusiasm for new possibilities clearly got the better of suspicious skepticism about political realities. "Atoussa H," an Iranian woman, responded in *Le Nouvel Observateur* that, "It is also written [by Foucault] that [Islamic government would mean] minorities have the right to freedom, on the condition that they do not injure the majority. At what point do the minorities begin to 'injure the majority'?" (209). This is precisely the kind of question that we would expect Foucault himself to have asked—the kind of question he had raised, for example, about prisons and sexuality.

Foucault's last two essays about Iran, both of which appeared after Khomeini had come to power and "Islamic government" had been established, suggest that he was beginning—however reluctantly—to reassess his enthusiastic hopes. These essays are characterized by a tone of regret and disappointment, with a reconsideration of the ideals that had motivated his

interest in the Iranian revolution. In an open letter to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, he calls on Bazargan to remember the obligations that are demanded of governments—including an obligation "to submit itself to judgment when it claims to judge,... [from] all men in the world" (262). "Is it useless to revolt?" concludes that, even though the Iranian revolution failed to liberate its people, the resistance to power that it demonstrated is still valuable: "My ethics are 'antistrategic'. One must be respectful when a singularity arises and intransigent as soon as the state violates universals" (267).

As that statement suggests, the essays in this appendix can give us important insight into Foucault's broader philosophical hopes and political analyses. Along with the recent publication of his 1978 and 1979 (in French) and 1982 (in English) Collège de France courses, they document a transitional period in Foucault's thought, from an emphasis on power towards subjectivity, spirituality, and ethics. The Iranian revolt was for him a case study, like Herculine Barbin, Pierre Rivière, and Damiens—but unlike the work on those figures, it constituted a study of contemporary events and, as Afary and Anderson note, his "only firsthand experience of revolution" (2). The essays and interview translated here constitute an important, concise contribution to Foucauldian studies.

Rodinson on Foucault

The appendix also includes several documents and texts that were not written by Foucault. Most important of these are three essays critical of Foucault by Maxime Rodinson. The first two, published in 1978 and 1979 in *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* respectively, are contemporary with Foucault's work on Iran. The third, published in 1993 as an introduction to a reprint of the second, is an explicit reflection upon Foucault's engagement with the Iranian revolution and its aftermath.

In the first two essays, though he does not make explicit reference to Foucault's articles, Rodinson characterizes Foucault as one who comes "fresh to the problem [of Islam and politics] in an idealistic frame of mind" (233). With respect to Foucault's diagnosis of a universal Iranian desire for "Islamic government," he notes that "[M]uslim government in itself means nothing. ... The term can cover different, even diametrically opposed, regimes" (236). He goes on to observe that:

There is neither improbability nor scandal in revolutionary mobilizations that take place in the name of religion. They can succeed better than others. However, it is necessary to be vigilant toward their victories. It is also necessary to maintain a critical attitude toward both the propaganda of the intellectuals within these movements and the credulity of those outside them. (244)

Such a critical attitude is, I would argue, a core Foucauldian value—albeit one that he seems to have lost sight of as he listened to the Iranians' hopeful dreams of liberation from the Shah.

In his 1993 assessment, with which this volume closes, Rodinson comes to similar conclusions: "Michel Foucault... placed excessive hopes in the Iranian Revolution" (270). Rodinson is particularly intrigued by Foucault's notion of a "political spirituality"—its possibilities and its limitations:

Undeniably, the tendencies that Foucault uncovered existed at the heart of the Iranian revolutionary movement of the period. ... (271)

Multiple cases of political spirituality have existed. All came to an end very quickly.... (271)

... all of these "political spiritualities" escape only rarely from the usual laws of political struggle. (276)

This suggests that Foucault's analyses of power—of the dynamics of political struggles—can help us to understand the continuing history of Iran. It also suggests that the case of the Iranian revolution led Foucault himself to confront a new problem—or rather, an old problem in a new light: reconciling hope for liberation with the realities of power. This may help, in part, to account for Foucault's shifting research interests in subsequent years. Rodinson's criticisms anticipate many of the points that Afary and Anderson make in the first part of this book, to which we shall now turn.

Afary and Anderson on Foucault

Afary and Anderson's own essay attempts to accomplish two tasks: first, it articulates a specific critique of Foucault's attitudes toward the Iranian revolt and to Islamism (esp. in chapters 2-4); and second, it attempts to explain those attitudes in terms of his earlier and later work (chapters 1 and 5). Their critique of Foucault emphasizes an uncritical naiveté on his part with respect to Islam, his neglect of gender issues, and what they characterize as "Orientalism" in his larger philosophical project. I find that they have accomplished the first task, but fall short on the second.

Two central strengths of their analysis are reflected in the three middle chapters. First, they provide a very useful summary of Iranian history and Islamic tradition, which serves to contextualize the events of the Iranian

revolution and Foucault's analysis of it. Chapter two presents a brief history of the Pahlavi regime in Iran and discusses the Shi'ite rituals of Muharram and Karbala, rituals that were used by the Islamists to organize opposition to the Shah. Afary and Anderson also note here several parallels between Islamic and Christian practices of penance, suggesting that his Iranian visits may have shaped his later interest in Christian practices.

Second, chapters three and four develop their critique of Foucault through a close reading of his own essays as well as of critics such as Rodinson. On the one hand, "Foucault showed an extraordinarily keen insight into Islamism's global reach," but "there was no note of criticism, or even hesitation" (108). His emphasis on political spirituality enabled him to understand "the balance of forces much more correctly than most secular oppositionists and their Western counterparts" (88), but also led to an "uncritical enthusiasm" (91) which lacked "a sustained critique or even a questioning of Khomeinism" (90). Particularly noteworthy is his failure to appreciate women's situation in Khomeini's Islam—a situation highlighted by other Western writers, including Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet. In sum, "what continued to override the possibility of a critical perspective was the fact that he was so enamored by the ability of the Islamists to galvanize tens of millions of people through such traditions that he ignored the dangers" (125).

This raises an important question: Why was Foucault so blind to the dangers of Islamic government? Afary and Anderson try to answer it by situating the essays on Iran within Foucault's oeuvre. Their answer, the second task of the book, is provocative but ultimately disappointing. They argue:

that something deeper than ignorance of Iranian history and culture, something more organic to Foucault's core theoretical stance, was at work in creating the deep flaws that marked his writings on Iran. Foucault's positions on Iran... accentuate some of the problematic consequences of his overall theoretical enterprise. (136)

The first chapter begins this project by identifying several themes they see running through his earlier work; and the fifth continues it in a discussion of the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Their argument in chapter one is that Foucault presents an Orientalist "grand narrative:" "he often replaced the earlier grand narratives of modernity with his own meta-narrative, a binary construct wherein traditional social orders were privileged over modern ones" (22). The central characteristic of this "grand narrative" is, they claim, a hybrid sort of Orientalism, which brings together and privileges both traditional Eastern cultures (i.e., Islam in contemporary Iran) and ancient pre-modern societies (i.e., Classical and Hellenist Greco-Roman culture) in

opposition to the modern West. The basic problem here is that their reading is overly reductive—in constructing this "grand narrative" out of "binary oppositions," they fail to acknowledge the subtleties and complexities that give Foucault's analyses their force. They also misread Foucault as generally hostile to feminism, even asking in a moment of rhetorical zeal, "Was Foucault trying to undermine contemporary feminist discourse by calling protests against child molestation an example of 'collective intolerance'?" (28). Feminists have had much to say about the value of Foucault's work, and Afary and Anderson correctly criticize his neglect of gender issues in the Iranian revolt, but the conclusion that his larger project was anti-feminist is unwarranted. For example, Foucault criticized the ancient Greek culture precisely for its mistreatment of women. When pushed by interviewers to characterize it as an "attractive alternative" he refused, noting that "[t]he Greek ethics was linked to a purely virile society with slaves, in which the women were underdogs whose pleasure had no importance..."¹

In the final chapter, Afary and Anderson note certain parallels between traditional Islamic attitudes toward homosexual practices and those of ancient Greece that Foucault discussed in the final volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. They then criticize his reading of ancient practices on the grounds that he failed to recognize the asymmetries of power that characterize those practices: "In Foucault's genealogies of the modern world, we have docile bodies but not resisting subjects; in his nostalgic pursuit of an ethics of love in Greek antiquity, we have desiring subjects whose power games and techniques of domination are hardly scrutinized" (153). This is a valuable insight, but it does not reflect a full understanding of Foucault's final project nor of the place of the last two volumes in that project. The last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* should be read carefully, because they represent the intersection of two very different projects, both left incomplete and neither adequately articulated in these volumes. The first was Foucault's promised six-volume study of modern sexuality, and the second was his study of ancient Greek and early Christian practices of subjectivation in terms of problematizations. This latter project demanded that, at least initially, Foucault approach the ancient practices with a different lens than he had used in, for example, *Discipline and Punish*. That project can and should be integrated with the earlier analyses of modern power (and I think Foucault intended for it to be), but Afary and Anderson's critique does not seem to recognize this. (The quotation above illustrates, for example, that Foucault brought a critical attitude to bear on Ancient Greek practices). Afary and

1 "On the genealogy of ethics," p. 232 in H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)

Anderson have, however, begun an important discussion about the reasons for Foucault's critical blindness toward Islam in Iran.

Afary and Anderson's text is, I think, more helpful for those already familiar with Foucault but not with Iran or Islam than it is for those better versed in Middle Eastern politics or history who would use it as an introduction to Foucault. They provide a very valuable service in contextualizing Foucault's essays with respect to Iranian history and politics, as well as Islamic tradition; their insightful and sharp criticisms of those essays are well made. Their attempt to explain Foucault's critical failure, however, is unfortunately blunted by an inadequate reading of Foucault's other works. Nevertheless, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution constitutes an important and timely contribution to Foucauldian scholarship. In making Foucault's essays on Iran available in English, and in providing a close reading of those texts that contextualizes them in terms of Iranian politics and Islamic tradition, Afary and Anderson have performed a significant service for English-language readers of Foucault, and for students of Iranian and Islamic politics.

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