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Review essay

An uncritical Foucault? Foucault and the Iranian Revolution

Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 346 pp., \$24.00

There is much to appreciate in the volume *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* which contains Foucault's writings on Iran and a commentary on them of almost 200 pages. The translation and organizing of Foucault's texts by Professors Afary and Anderson will make possible an accurate grasp of these controversial writings from 1978 and 1979. The inclusion of some critics of Foucault as well as the presentation of detailed contexts for the Iranian and Parisian situations makes the book particularly valuable. And, most importantly, as is the case with several other recent publications, the authors invite the reader to a more penetrating consideration and formulation of the political responsibility of the intellectual. With that noted, my hope is that the readers of *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* will begin with Foucault's own writings and only then turn to the authors' interpretation because I am not persuaded by their central argument that Foucault was guilty of an 'uncritical embrace of the Iranian Islamists' (105). As was the case with most other observers of the rapidly changing situation in revolutionary Iran, Foucault made misjudgements about the likely future course of the revolution. Khomeini did become the hero of the Iranian people and even the distinguished Marxist poet, Siavash Kasraii, wrote a poem celebrating the ayatollah. But, contrary to Foucault's expectation, Khomeini

did not withdraw from the political scene and Iran has had to live with the consequences of that refusal ever since.

Still, when the situation evolved from the violence of the shah to the violence of the ayatollah, Foucault protested, as in his 14 April 1979 open letter to the then Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. He wrote:

It is necessary – and it is urgent – to give the one being prosecuted as many means of defense and as many rights as possible. Is he ‘obviously guilty’? Does he have the whole of public opinion against him? Is he hated by his people? This, precisely, confers on him rights, all the more intangible ones. It is the obligation of the one who governs to explain them and to guarantee them to the accused. (262)

Perhaps it will be said that the majority of the Iranian people shows that it has confidence in the regime that is being established and therefore also in its judicial practices. The fact of being accepted, supported, and voted for overwhelmingly does not attenuate the obligations of governments. Rather, it imposes stricter ones on them. (263)

A month later he wrote in *Le Monde*, as his reply to critics: ‘It is certainly not shameful to change one’s opinion, but there is no reason to say that one’s opinion has changed when one is against hands being chopped off today, after having been against the tortures of the SAVAK yesterday’ (266). As Hannah Arendt had done in reaction to the so-called failure of the Hungarian revolution in 1956, Foucault saluted the courage of the tens of thousands who risked their lives in the hope of a better post-shah life. As he wrote: ‘The spirituality of those who were going to their deaths has no similarity whatsoever with the bloody government of a fundamentalist clergy’ (265). As certainly turned out to be the case with the Hungarian uprising and its influence in Eastern Europe up until 1989, the final word about the efficacy of that Iranian spirituality and revolution has not yet been spoken. And, to do them justice, Afary and Anderson are not totally without hope regarding how religious influence might yet develop.

At times their commentary is generous in its recognition of some of Foucault’s intellectual strengths and they certainly recognize how ahead of his time he was when he wrote that the ‘problem of Islam as a political force is an essential one for our time and the coming years’ (210). I think they are correct in their evaluation of some of the limitations of his political engagement, especially his inadequacy to the women’s issue in Iran in general and the weakness of his reply to the letter from an Iranian feminist in particular, a letter that clearly warned of some possibly dangerous consequences of an Islamic government (209–10). But there is something jarring, for me at least, in their writing on Foucault, a palpable hostility that leads them to misrepresent some of his intellectual positions and analyses. Let me cite just three examples.

With reference to the second volume of Foucault's history of sexuality, they write: '*The Use of Pleasure* celebrates the man/boy ethics of love, or in Foucault's words, "true love" (as against the presumed false love of women)' (147). Such a comment ignores the very specific problematic he was examining in that text, namely, the roots of the construction of the sex-self-truth triad in western culture. Their 'false love of women' strikes me as a gratuitous canard.

A second example: they later fault the third volume of his history of sexuality by claiming that Roman culture represented an improvement in women's situation and then they state that 'Foucault clearly took a dim view of these changes' (153). It is a curious remark, as if Foucault was a misogynist, and one could argue that the feminist viewpoint is far better represented in what Foucault is showing, namely, how the particular erotic developed in Greek culture in terms of the relationship between an adult male and a young adolescent boy migrated in Roman culture to the relationship between male and female with the consequence that women's identity was locked into a permanent adolescent status. And that transfer was hardly a progressive step. A third example would be their comment on Foucault's suggestion that 'silence' as an experience may deserve a greater prominence in our human relationships. Silence would be one of the practices that would have a place in the contemporary 'aesthetics of existence' that Foucault was thinking about at the end of his life. It may be my Jesuit training but I find the prospect of strengthening spheres of silence in our lives to be very appealing. But they associate Foucault's interest in silence with some repressive project that derives from his attraction to eastern cultures. 'Foucault's "East" implicitly privileges intuition and silence (read the silence of mostly youth, women, and the lower classes in premodern social orders) as the preferred modes of discourse . . .' (19). This is misinterpretation and a disservice to the Foucault who lent his name and energy to all sorts of causes, including the establishment of a journal that would make it possible for imprisoned people in France to speak to the wider society.

Their commentary gives many opportunities for careful reflection and here I would like to focus on just three points. The first is how we should understand Foucault's positive response to the role of religious forms and communities in the Iranian revolution. They refer several times to Foucault's remark in an interview:

People always quote Marx and the opium of the people. The sentence that immediately preceded that statement and which is never quoted says that religion is the spirit of a world without spirit. 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. (255, 124)

Afary and Anderson fault him for becoming uncritical in not seeing the continuing opium dimension of religion (130) but they root that lack of critical ability in his very way of thinking. To quote them: '[We] have argued that something deeper than ignorance of Iranian history and culture, something more organic to Foucault's theoretical stance, was at work in creating the deep flaws that marked his writings on Iran.' That deeper flaw was a poststructuralist, leftist discourse which opened the door to an uncritical stance because it had 'spent all of its energy opposing the secular liberal or authoritarian modern state' (136). I would want to make the strong claim that, contrary to their position, Foucault's openness to the religious dynamics of the Islamic world was not due to a flawed style of reasoning but rather to his personal experiences. Let us recall that Foucault spent a year (1958–9) in Poland where he would have seen the Catholic Church's strong opposition to the communist government. Of course, Pope John Paul II, who became pope a month before Foucault's first trip to Iran, brought that resistance to an extraordinary efficacy as was shown in the massive outpouring of popular support for him during his trip to Poland in the spring of 1979. That visit was the catalyst for the Solidarity movement, of which Foucault became a strong public supporter, and arguably was one of the events that announced the coming collapse of communism.

However, even more important for understanding Foucault's sense of the religious dynamic were his visits to Brazil in the early and mid-1970s while the military dictatorship was in control. He would have been very alert to the theologies of liberation that had come to prominence in South America at that time even if suspicious of any Marxist dimensions to them. He would have seen the Catholic Church's militant advocacy of human rights and the type of power it was capable of exercising. To give one example: in 1975 a prominent Jewish journalist, Vladimir Herzog, was killed while in police custody, another event that intimidated the Jewish community there. The archbishop of São Paulo decided to organize an inter-denominational memorial service for the murdered journalist and this is Foucault's impression of the event:

[The service] drew thousands and thousands of people into the church, on to the square and so on, and the cardinal in red robes presided over the ceremony, and he came forward at the end of the ceremony, in front of the faithful, and he greeted them shouting: 'Shalom, shalom.' And there was all around the square armed police and there were plain clothes policemen in the church. The police pulled back; there was nothing the police could do against that. I have to say, that had a grandeur of strength, there was a gigantic historical weight there.¹

It was the spiritual-political power of that historical weight that prepared him for Iran and generated some of his hope for its revolution.

Although Professors Afary and Anderson are not totally hopeless regarding religion, they clearly place it more on the side of the people's opium.

A second point for consideration is the difference of judgements between Foucault and the authors on America's role in Iranian politics. Foucault was a very strong critic of the United States' general illegal interference in Iranian affairs such as the CIA coup that put the shah into power in the first place. In judging the Iranian revolution, it is important to recall that it was against a tyrannical government that used its secret police (SAVAK) to violently repress political opposition. I do not detect a critique of American policy in their writing and certainly none of the outrage that the regime's murder of thousands provoked in Foucault, let alone among the Iranians who made the revolution. At one point they refer to the government of the shah and 'his agenda of reform' (57). Where do the authors stand on American policy, the regime of the shah, and the legitimacy of its overthrow? Certainly how they respond to that would be decisive in how they read Foucault.

The third point for consideration is a much broader one. Quite apart from our disagreement regarding Foucault, what are we to conclude from the failure of so many thinkers in the face of the 20th century's ideologies?² Afary and Anderson refer to Maxime Rodinson's identification of 'another source of Foucault's misperceptions of Iranian Islamism – the fact that he was a philosopher by training'. Rodinson himself writes that 'Philosophically formed minds, even and perhaps especially the most eminent, are among the most vulnerable to the seductions of theoretical slogans' and, indeed, he 'believed that more lucidity can be found in singers than in philosophers' (135, 277). But we hold philosophers to a high ethical standard because they are saying something about how one might live. The authors personally defend the philosophical mode of reflection but, in doing so, they appeal, among others, to Sartre which surprised me because he would seem to be among the most vulnerable to charges of political irresponsibility (135–6). But how do they see the more general issue? I raise the point because, and their own work reflects this, there is a palpable ethical uneasiness in our current intellectual culture that has the potential of producing a more refined critical awareness about the dangers set by political life for intellectuals. The enthusiastic service of many academics to causes such as fascism and communism is the trauma that is the background of contemporary historical and philosophical work in this area. Among the most vivid witnesses to the wound inflicted by such service is Viktor Klemperer. I recently read the gripping, posthumously published diaries of Klemperer who recorded, on an almost daily basis, what it was to live as a Jew married to a Gentile in Germany throughout the years of 1933 to 1945. Klemperer had been a professor of Romance

languages in Dresden and the diaries witness to his intellectual effort to understand the sources of the cruelty that he constantly confronted. In an entry on 16 August 1936, he fantasizes a turning of the tables with his oppressors and writes this:

if one day the situation were reversed and the fate of the vanquished lay in my hands, then I would let all the ordinary folk go and even some of the leaders, who might perhaps after all have had honorable intentions and not know what they were doing. But I would have all the intellectuals strung up, and the professors three feet higher than the rest; they would be left hanging from the lampposts for as long as was compatible with hygiene.³

Klemperer was constantly startled by the wickedness, the cowardice, the stupidity, the opportunism of German university professors during the period of National Socialism. And, if one knows something of the historical record, it would be difficult not to be startled. And I would claim that Foucault's awareness of the failures of other intellectuals to grasp dynamics of political movements, especially of fascism, is very relevant to the seriousness with which he took the religious accents and forms of Iranian protests and, thus, how he envisioned the task of political criticism. Tragically, fascism certainly realized that religious practices and forms were not just an opium in people's lives. And so did Michel Foucault.

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Notes

- 1 Foucault, 'On Religion', in *Michel Foucault: Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 107.
- 2 In recent years, in addition to the steady scrutiny of Martin Heidegger, there have been two general treatments of the issue: Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), and Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 3 Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years*, vol. I, 1933–1941 (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 184.