

FILLING THE VOID

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Discussed in this essay:
*Foucault and the Iranian
Revolution: Gender and the
Seductions of Islamism*
By Janet Afary and
Kevin B. Anderson
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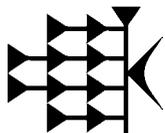
BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 1978 and May 1979, the French philosopher Michel Foucault published more than twenty articles about the Iranian Revolution. Curiously, only three of them have ever been available in English—until now.

In *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson have translated and assembled not only Foucault's articles on Iran but also interviews with Foucault on the subject (including one from an Iranian journal, translated from Persian), critical responses to Foucault's Iran writings by several intellectuals, letters to the editor of one of the magazines for which he wrote the articles, an open letter Foucault wrote to Iran's revolutionary prime minister, and statements by Simone de Beauvoir and Iranian feminists on the revolution.



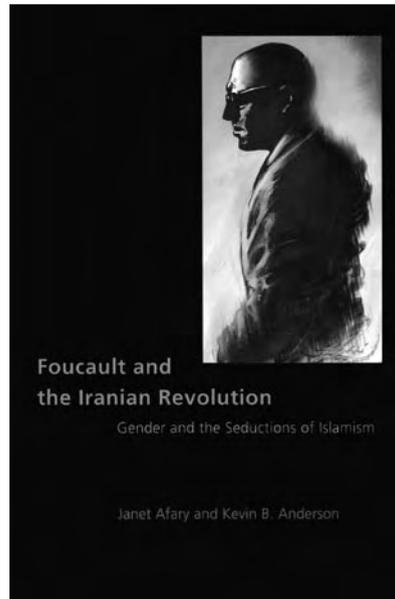
It wasn't until 1994, with the French publication of a four-volume collection of Foucault's occasional writings—a full fifteen years after the fact, and a decade after his death—that several of his Iran articles were rescued from the proverbial trash heap of history. But we Anglophones had to wait another decade—more than a quarter-century since their original appearance—for the documents to be bound together. The dossier, twenty-two items and one hundred pages in all, appears as the appendix to this volume: another 160 pages are devoted to a narrative and critical reconstruction of the entire affair, which Afary and Anderson call “the most significant and passionate political commitment of [Foucault's] life.”

The publication of this book is a major event in the world of Foucault scholarship, and it can be expected to generate a torrent of discussion, debate, reconsideration, and intellectual fireworks. Foucault's adventure in geopolitical journalism provoked considerable controversy at the time. In unearthing that controversy and forcing us to revisit it, Afary and Anderson's book is certain to evoke the same passions and push the same buttons that surfaced during the original dust-up, because the issues at the heart of the debate are still very much with us.



Foucault went to Iran in the fall of 1978 to write a series of articles about the growing unrest there for the Italian mass-

circulation newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. He quickly developed an intense interest in what he saw unfolding around him, and



was deeply impressed by what he called the emergence of a “political spirituality” in the Islamist wing of the movement to topple the shah.

The shah was forced from power, and although the anti-shah movement was a coalition of Islamists, liberal nationalists, revolutionary Marxists, and secular feminists (with some of these categories bleeding into one another, quite literally), Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers were able to consolidate their control of the new regime, not only squeezing most of the other factions out of power, but unleashing a bloodbath of repression against many of their members.

Foucault's chronicle of these events comes in for tough criticism by Iranian and French feminists as well as some Marxists. At the time of the revolution, it became quickly apparent that the Islamists sought to turn back the clock

“fourteen hundred years” on relations between the sexes, as one feminist group proclaimed, forcing women to wear the veil and relegating them to the home. Yet Foucault, his critics argued, seemed barely to notice—let alone express horror at—the Islamists' virulent sexism. Reading his account of the uprising, you would scarcely know that forced veiling and beating of women had become rampant in the Islamist wing of the movement—which was the main wing in which Foucault took interest.

Foucault was less than engaging in response to his critics. He accused them of Eurocentrism, of antireligious chauvinism, and of employing prosecutorial tactics against him, while refusing as a matter of principle to reply to one critique leveled at him. The situation under Khomeini's new Islamic republic deteriorated dramatically, with waves of repression against secularists, feminists, leftists, and homosexuals. Women were stabbed for refusing to wear the veil; leftists were rounded up, tortured, and made to disappear; and homosexuals were summarily executed.

With the exception of a single statement—which I'll discuss below—Foucault's response was one of silence: “From June 1979 until his death in 1984,” Afary and Anderson report, “Foucault never referred publicly to Iran.” He did not attempt to come to terms with what had happened, nor did he provide any expression of support for the victims of the new regime's tyranny.

How are we to make sense of this episode?

Philosophers aren't known for having the sharpest political judgment. Perhaps because of the conceptual altitude from which they peer down at the events of

their day, their political vision isn't always 20/20. Many students of philosophy are willing to forgive them for this and to chalk it up to naiveté about temporal affairs.

Afary and Anderson aren't quite so easy on Foucault. They fault him for displaying poor political judgment in his appraisal of Khomeini's movement. At the same time, however, they ask whether that judgment was connected to his larger intellectual project—or at least to certain aspects of it. They conclude that it was, and in important ways.

Foucault was hardly unique among Western intellectuals in throwing his support behind the movement to oust the shah—this was a cause célèbre on the Left. Where Foucault differed from many of his contemporaries was in hitching his wagon to the Islamist wing of the revolt (describing it as “beautiful”) and in paying such scant attention to other elements of the anti-shah forces—including those of secular, liberal, feminist, and leftist persuasions. While French and American feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett stood in solidarity with their Iranian counterparts, Foucault viewed the modernist discourse of women's rights as foreign to the Iranian experience, as an orientalist superimposition on the religious masses.

Indeed, it was not *despite* the revolution's Islamist dimension that Foucault's intellectual-political juices got flowing, but *because* of it. He saw in the Iranian experience the promise of a whole different kind of rebellion—not just another national liberation struggle against colonialism, but something that went deeper: a revolt against modernity itself. Whereas third-world revolutions of the Marxist-Leninist variety were trapped, as Foucault saw it, in the language of

the Enlightenment, the Iranians had chosen a different path—one that departed on a fundamental



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level from the logic of all modern revolutions and that promised not merely a new political order but, in his words, a whole different “regime of truth.”



Why did Foucault interpret the events around him in the particular way he did? Why, in the case of Iran, did he suspend the deep-seated skepticism and antiutopianism which so marked his overall approach to political questions? What exactly was it about the Iranian revolution that animated Foucault and stirred his imagination, leading him to view the events of 1978–79 as world-historical in nature?

Afary and Anderson propose two keys to making sense of this. The first is political and intellectual; the second, personal and existential.

Foucault's intellectual project

was, on one level, a critique of the Enlightenment and the modern *Weltanschauung* it generated. Where its proponents championed the Enlightenment as a “science of freedom,” Foucault saw something quite different: the machinations of power and domination. In a series of landmark studies, he scrutinized modern institutions such as the prison, the clinic, and the asylum in relation to the rise of the so-called human sciences of psychiatry, criminology, medicine, sexology, and other fields. In stark contrast to the secular priesthood of experts who saw modernity as an explosion of progress and knowledge, Foucault viewed modernity as the construction of an elaborate panopticon, a gigantic system of surveillance and social engineering.

I'll never forget the initial impact of reading Foucault as an undergraduate, the shock therapy of being confronted with this picture of modernity. His arresting, flabbergasting counternarrative about the modern world has immeasurably altered the landscape of contemporary scholarship—in the social sciences, history, and the humanities. His depiction of power and knowledge as inextricably interlaced, and the image he conjured of modern society as a sadistic prison house, are now burned into our collective cultural consciousness. It is not an exaggerated claim to say that we are, in one sense, all Foucauldians now.

But could it be, Afary and Anderson ask, that the widely remarked upon one-sidedness of this astonishing picture of modernity colored Foucault's understanding of the events he witnessed in Iran? Might his fierce enmity toward modernity have led him to embrace a revolt against modernity, and blinded him to the dark side of that revolt?

The second, or existential, factor in the equation has to do with the religious rituals Foucault witnessed in Iran, and their impact on what we might call his sexual imaginary. Foucault was deeply moved by the penitence and martyrdom rituals he saw performed in the streets of Tehran. During this period, known as Muharram, Shia Muslims commemorate the murder of Hussein, the son of Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali; as a descendant of Muhammad, Shiites believe, Hussein was the rightful heir to the leadership of the Muslim caliphate but was murdered by his opponents (the Umayyads) in a bloodthirsty power grab. This dispute marks the fork in the road between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam, a feud that has important implications for Middle Eastern politics today.

Shiites mourn the massacre of Hussein and his followers through theatrical reenactment processions and self-flagellation rites; the mainly male participants in these passion plays chant eulogies, rhythmically beat their backs and chests with chains or sticks, use knives and swords to inflict wounds to their foreheads, and scorch their bodies. All the while, onlookers alternate between laughter and sobbing. "[Seemingly] oblivious to any sense of pain," some "cut their scalps in moments of frenzy," Afary and Anderson write, while others "smear dirt on their foreheads, indicating their eagerness to be buried for Hussein." Through the rites of Muharram, write Afary and Anderson, an "unacknowledged and unspoken, but clearly palpable, sexual energy is released on the streets." Noting "the whip and the little chains that the men twirl around to lash their shoulders," one scholar of Shiism was struck by what he called "the sexual nature of

this festival of death."

Death figures centrally here. Indeed, Foucault himself described Muharram as "a time when the

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crowds are ready to advance toward death in the intoxication of sacrifice." As the revolt against the shah grew, Muharram became increasingly charged with political symbolism, with the evil Umayyads representing the shah maneuvering to destroy Khomeini, who of course represented Hussein. Foucault was particularly moved by the "intoxication of sacrifice" he witnessed among Khomeini's followers, who were not merely willing to face their deaths for the cause, but seemed almost hell-bent on it—"more focused, perhaps, on martyrdom than on victory," Foucault observed. One is almost tempted to call it "necropolitics."

My friend Max Cafard poignantly captures the psychological dynamic at work here when he calls



Mel Gibson's film about the final hours of the life of Jesus *The Passion of the Masochist*. Whether in Christian or Islamic form, both are primal scenes of male suffering and physical agony; both are infused with the leitmotif of injustice and involve the internalization of guilt; both aestheticize violence and reach their climax in death; both contain more than a hint of sadomasochism and an undercurrent of homoeroticism.

In his 1993 biography *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, James Miller explored the interface between his subject's intellectual and personal preoccupations: Foucault's lifelong fascination with phenomena like pain, punishment, surveillance, and codes of sexual "normality" and "abnormality," on the one hand, and the penchant he displayed for sadomasochistic homoeroticism in his private life. Afary and Anderson attempt to connect the dots, as it were, between Miller's portrait and Foucault's writings on Iran. They link Foucault's intellectual intoxication with the Muharram rituals he witnessed to his fascination with what he called "limit experiences" that pushed the boundaries of life by flirting with death. (In his book *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Alexander Nehamas celebrates Foucault's attraction to limit experiences as an expression of the eudaemonistic ethic of approaching one's life as a work of art. I see no reason to criticize Foucault for this; I just don't think it's a very useful way to make sense of political life.)

Adding a third ingredient to the mix, Afary and Anderson see all of this as intertwined with Foucault's quest, in the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, for an alternative sexual ethos to our modern, scientific, post-

Freudian discourse of “liberation.” In search of this alternative ethos, he turned to ancient Greece and early Christendom, which contained, in his view, more open approaches to sexuality, and particularly to homosexuality. In his book *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love*, David Halperin wrote that Foucault reached into the past as an intervention into the present, in order “to discover a new way of seeing ourselves and, possibly, to create new ways of inhabiting our own skins.”

In an intricate and gripping interpretation, Afary and Anderson read Foucault’s articles on Iran in tandem with his *History of Sexuality*—which, they point out, he was writing during the period of his travels to Iran. He imagined in Iranian sexuality—particularly in the Muharram passion plays—precisely the kind of homoerotic openness that he venerated in the classical Mediterranean world. (In due course of time, it must be noted, theocratic Iran turned out to be considerably less open to homoeroticism—to put it mildly—than Foucault imagined it might be.) Nevertheless, all of these elements were at work, Afary and Anderson venture, simultaneously: Foucault’s pursuit of an alternative sexual ethos in the past; his personal proclivity for sadomasochistic homoeroticism and attraction to death; the excitement of the arresting spectacle of sexually charged religious rituals centered on pain and martyrdom; and his hunger for a new political spirituality that broke with both liberal-democratic capitalism and revolutionary Marxism.

Afary and Anderson sum up what they take to be the three points of convergence between Foucault’s postmodernism and



Khomeini’s anti- or premodernism as such: (1) an opposition to the imperialist and colonialist policies of the West; (2) a rejection of certain cultural and social aspects of modernity that had transformed gender roles and social hierarchies in both the East and the West; and (3) a fascination with the discourse of death as a path toward authenticity and salvation, a discourse that included rites of penitence and aimed at refashioning the self.

Afary and Anderson offer a feminist and leftist critique of Foucault vis-à-vis Iran, taking him to task for dismissing feminist warnings about the dangers the Islamists posed to women and for downplaying the authoritarianism of Khomeini’s movement. They also accuse Foucault of the very sin he accused some of his critics of: orientalism. Foucault portrayed the Iranian people as totally unified in their support for Khomeini and his program of Islamic government. The clerics, he wrote, embodied Iran’s “collective will,” a movement “without splits or internal conflicts.” This, Afary and Anderson argue, was empirically inaccurate—an obfuscation of the huge divisions, for example, between the many secular feminists in the anti-shah movement and the Islamists, whose repressive program was a threat to women’s rights. It was a projection, they contend, of Foucault’s own sympathies and fantasies onto an Iranian context he knew little about. The notion that Iranians think with one mind was quintessential orientalism.

Just before his death, Foucault wrote a pregnant essay titled “What is Enlightenment?” to mark the 200th anniversary of the publication of Immanuel Kant’s famous essay by the same title. In it, he seemed to be shifting philosophical gears and reflecting on his legacy. We should eschew, he admonished, “all projects that claim to be global or radical.” “In fact we know from experience,” he continued, “that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.” Though Iran is nowhere mentioned in the essay, Afary and Anderson suggest that the tragic outcome of the revolution—to which Foucault lent his enthusiastic support—formed the subtext to these lines and weighed heavily on his intellectual conscience. If they are right, Foucault can perhaps be blamed for never making this reconsideration explicit. And yet one can appreciate his effort to come to grips, however quietly, with the experience.

Afary and Anderson are engaged in an admittedly speculative enterprise, and are thus wide open to criticism. Champions of Foucault will likely disagree with the conclusions these authors reach. This is as it should be. Among the virtues of this book is that its publication of original source material in English will allow readers of Foucault to judge for themselves. The full text of everything Foucault ever published on Iran is here, in Foucault’s own words, allowing us—and history—to ruminate on one more illuminating chapter in the history of philosopher-kings. ●