

Reviews

Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism, Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, eds., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, ISBN 0226007863, 346 pp.

Iran was never important to Michel Foucault. Indeed, the world outside France rarely impacted his scholarly work or even his conversations with journalists and activists. A French scholar invested in the birth of the French (or “Western”) modern age, Foucault did, however, recognize that his concepts might have value elsewhere. A footnote in his 1975 classic *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* reports that his analysis has chosen “examples from military, medical, educational, and industrial institutions. Other examples might have been taken from colonization, slavery, and child rearing.” In the fall of 1978, *Corriere della Sera* invited the famous philosopher to travel to Iran to observe the development of the Iranian revolution and to contribute a series of dispatches for the paper.

The book under review does not give us a documentary picture of Foucault’s time in Iran. While that would be fascinating, it is not its task. Foucault wrote about ten essays for the Italian paper (later translated for *Le Nouvel Observateur*). In 1998, Hermes Press in Tehran collected them into a volume. The present book translated the articles and interviews, as well as responses to Foucault in the French press (particularly from the renowned scholar of Islam, Maxime Rodinson, and from an anonymous Iranian woman, Atoussa H.). In addition, the book has several sharp essays from the editors that analyze the dispatches and

offer a very cogent critique of them and of Foucault's theoretical apparatus. To help us wind our way through Foucault's articles, the editors also provide snapshot analyses of the Iranian Revolution and its mutation into the Islamic Republic.

The book opens with élan. How could a professor at the Collège de France have anything in common with the Islamic Republic of Iran? For Afary and Anderson:

Both were searching for a new form of political spirituality as a counter discourse to a thoroughly materialistic world; both clung to idealized notions of premodern social orders; both were disdainful of modern liberal juridical systems; and both admired individuals who risked death in attempts to reach a more authentic existence.

When Foucault went to Iran in 1978–79, he not only reported on the Iranian Revolution, but he also met, in the flesh, his ideological kin: those who would fashion a kind of Shi'ite pageantry. For Afary and Anderson, currents within the Revolution revived “the old and forbidden rituals of Muharram and, simultaneously, a new interpretation of Shi'ite traditions, one that emphasized martyrdom.” The intellectual wisdom behind this was Ali Shariati, but the social forces that took this to the streets came from those social classes long suppressed by the Shah's state. The first stage of the Revolution, the mass stage, brought forth a violent response from the state. Khomeini returns from France and offered succor and hope to his followers (here, after the 8 September 1978 “Black Friday Massacre:” “My dears, do not fear giving martyrs, giving life and property for God, Islam and the Muslim nation. This is the custom of our prophet and his clan. Our blood is no more precious than the blood of the martyrs of Karbala”). From another part of France, Foucault arrived in Tehran ten days after this massacre of at least two hundred and fifty people.

The first few articles from Foucault provide insightful analyses of the situation on the ground. He met with a range of people, intellectuals, students, religious leaders, and others and sketched out the depth of anger at the Shah and at the global dispensation that seemed intent upon squelching the Iranian desire for freedom. But when he traveled to Qom to meet Ayatollah Shariatmadari, Foucault began to write more aggressively about the political spirituality of the Revolution. From now, when confronted with a secular Iranian voice, Foucault would dismiss it out of hand as inauthentic (as speaking, he wrote, with “an excessive Westernness”). The authentic Iranian subject would be one who spoke from within the ambit of Shi'ism, regardless of Iranian Shi'ism's own reconstruction in the modern era. The Left, who were as yet a crucial part of the revolutionary force, could not be real for Foucault (who, himself, had been disenchanted with the Left in Paris, moving hastily to the rather romantic Maoism of the French intelligentsia). The real voice of Iran came from the clerics, “These

men of religion are like so many photographic plates on which the anger and aspirations of the community are marked.”

What moved Foucault was not simply his vision of the political spirituality of the Islamic currents, but also the deep disdain for liberal legality therein. In one of his dispatches, Foucault described how a religious leader had told him that he awaited the *return of the Mahdi and the construction of a utopia*:

It is something very old and also very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet, but also of advancing toward a luminous and distant point where it would be possible to renew fidelity rather than maintain obedience. In pursuit of this ideal, the distrust of legality seemed to me to be essential, along with the faith in the creativity of Islam.”

Foucault's effusions over the pre-modern, of those currents that opposed liberal laws, resonated with his historical and political judgments. One might recall, for instance, Foucault's wistful callousness when confronted by the case of sexual assault of a young girl by a farmhand in 1867. The state intervened and the boy was arrested. Foucault, writing in his *The History of Sexuality*, noted:

What is the significant thing about this story? The pettiness of it all; the fact that this everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality, these inconsequential bucolic pleasures, could become, from a certain time, the object not only of a collective intolerance but of a judicial action, a medical intervention, a careful clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration.

For Foucault the shift to modern forms of rational government was deeply troubling, not so much for the class nature of rule, but for the very institutions of legality and administration. It was far better to promote pre-modern forms of custom, even if these are misogynist and unaccountably violent. In a discussion with some Maoists in the early 1970s, Foucault mocked the protocols of administrative justice for the “simple arrangement” of the “popular tribunals” who provide a rough and ready verdict: in other words, popular lynching.

In an essay that is now the ground of much social theory (“Governmentality”), Foucault argued that the modern state was “governed according to rational principles that are intrinsic to it and cannot be derived from natural or divine laws or the principles of wisdom and prudence.” If France, the home of rational law, disgusted Foucault, in classic orientalist fashion, he sought refuge in the new state being created by the clerics, whom he saw as the font of Shi'ite wisdom and prudence. The cost borne by this wistfulness on women and on those who might want to challenge this dispensation was irrelevant to Foucault. When challenged by an Iranian feminist, he answered,

“The problem of Islam as a political force is an essential one for our time and the coming years. In order to approach it with a minimum of intelligence, the first condition is not to begin by bringing in hatred.” Foucault took his seat on the side of the clerics. Afary and Anderson’s useful book is a warning to Foucault’s disciplines: drawing from the conceptual apparatus of the great man, which side will it take you?

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