

BOOKS

The "other" Orientalism

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Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism by Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson; The University of Chicago Press, 2005; pages 312, cloth \$60, paper \$24.

MICHEL FOUCAULT'S anti-imperialist and anti-modernist philosophy is emblematic of post-modern thought. His characteristic archaeological method, with its careful and meticulous deconstruction of modern life, excavates and lays bare the "micro power" systems implicit in modern existence and has long been the darling of Western leftists and post-colonial theorists alike.

Foucault's suspicion of utopianism, his hostility to grand narratives and universals and his stress on difference and singularity fuel the engines of cultural relativist discourse. It is predictable, therefore, that when Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson embark on a deconstruction of the follies of Michel Foucault, specifically his near uncritical celebration of the Iranian Revolution, in their book *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, they disconcert many Western leftists.

The reactions to the book, such as the review by Jonathan Ree in *The Nation*, have been intriguing exercises in exposing the cherished image of post-modernists and Western leftists as self-styled champions of the "other". Their incantations in defence of Foucault represent their discomfort at being the subject of critique that has been traditionally reserved for "orientalists" whose transgressions in "writing the other" were so popularly articulated by Edward Said over 20 years ago.

The book is an engaging and arduously assembled critique of Michel Foucault's previously un-translated writings on the Iranian Revolution written for the Italian newspaper *Corriere de la Sera* (1978-80). In it, Afary and Anderson lay bare how certain important themes in Foucault's own philosophy challenge the much-celebrated Foucauldian immunity to romanticised notions of "an authoritarian politics that promised radically to refashion from above the lives and thought of a people for its ostensible benefit". Afary and Anderson take their readers through the theoretical and philosophical foundations of Foucault's thought, painting assiduously the philosopher's mental landscape, its gradations of thought and valleys of doubts. They explicate the bases of Foucauldian philosophy: the centrality of power in Foucauldian discourse; Foucault's descriptions of modern power as "pervasive" and insidious, seeping through the web of all social political and economic relations "down to the very depth of society". Afary and Anderson go on to point out, again to the chagrin of some, that while the dualism in Foucault's work centred around the modern and the pre-modern, his descriptions of "pre-modern" were often Eastern and a "counter-discourse that appropriated oriental lore in opposition to Western strategies of control". Foucault's counter-discourse, they allege,

reifies the oriental (presented as the pre-modern), in stark opposition to the traditional orientalist who denigrated the barbarism and uncivilised "otherness" of Eastern thought. It is thus a final and complete reversion of its modern predecessor. Having laid the philosophical foundations of Foucault's thought, Afary and Anderson transpose on the presented philosophical landscape, the historical event that is the subject of the treatise. Hence, the cataclysmic reaction between the anti-modern philosophy of Foucault and the anti-modern but unassailably theocratic movement precipitated by Ayatollah Khomeini is exculpated. On the one hand is a philosopher whose world view is a scathing and seething reaction against the modern world; on the other, a theocratic leader whose rallying cry managed to appropriate the unifying rhetoric of anti-imperialism to institute a draconian and repressive order in Iran.

In recounting the evolution of the Iranian Revolution, Afary and Anderson pay careful attention to its Constitution as a particularly modern movement. The discussion of Ali Shariati, the leftist intellectual whose ideas were later appropriated into the rhetoric of revolution, represents how Western existential thought was synthesised into Islamist discourse to produce a starkly anti-traditionalist version of Shia Islam. The recasting of the martyrdom of Hussein (a paradigmatic story known to every Shia Muslim) in revolutionary terms relating to contemporary politics and the overthrow of the Shah, the epitomisation of *jihad* and death as the ultimate life experience uniting the martyr with his divine destiny, are all presented with attention to their synthetic and hybrid ingenuity and their contrast to traditional Shia modes of understanding rituals of mourning during Muharram.

In tracing the transformation of traditionally significant epithets of Shia Islam, Afary and Anderson bring attention to the question of whether the "pre-modern" East truly exists outside the philosophic imagination of the Western Left represented here by Foucault.

Having established the modern and synthetic nature of the rhetoric of the Revolution, Afary and Anderson present the *piece de resistance*, Foucault's actual writings on the Iranian Revolution (these are presented in their entirety in the appendix of the book). Foucault's enthusiastic embrace of the ritualistic, anti-modern and anti-imperialist face of the Revolution appears almost naïve in "its uncritical stance" towards the politics of Islamism. Equally shocking is Foucault's inability to envision within the Islamist project the repressive and autocratic regime that eventually emerged under the Ayatollah.

In one particularly damning passage Foucault says: "One thing must be clear. By 'Islamic government' nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clerics would have the role of supervision or control." When challenged by critics, Foucault emphasises the crucial place of "political spirituality" in Iran and laments the loss of such spirituality in early modern Europe whose possibility, he wrote, "we (the Europeans) have forgotten ever since the Renaissance and the great crises of Christianity". The embrace of the Islamist rhetoric, with its beguiling attire of tradition, spirituality, anti-modernism and anti-imperialism, coalesces successfully with Foucault's own work prior to his writings on Iran. While the authors acknowledge that Foucault never explicitly recognised in his writings the search for a tangible anti-modernity, tangibility and concretisation being the

death of the uncertainty he so celebrated, the juxtaposition of his philosophy with his journalistic endeavours in Iran presents Foucault's perhaps unconscious but nevertheless observable predilection towards discovering a manifest extra-political and anti-modern reality.

A striking and perhaps most troublesome exchange is Foucault's exchange with the Iranian feminist referred to as Atoussa H. Foucault's blindness to the repression promised and eventually perpetrated on Iranian women by Khomeini is the strongest retort to the blindness of his appraisal of the Revolution. The scathing critique of Foucault's inability to give due consideration to gender-based critiques of the revolution, to place any legitimacy in the protests of Iranian women forced to leave the workforce and don black *chadors*, to find not at all disturbing the introduction of laws that allowed polygamy and reduced women to half persons in matters of testimony and inheritance, presents a picture that is deeply troubling and irksome. It is heightened tragically by the authors' presentation of Foucault's response to the exiled Atoussa H. in which he wrote that the woman could not understand the power and importance of the Revolution because she approached it with a "hatred" that blinded her to its importance.

Read narrowly, the response represents quite simply a disregard for a political position by a journalist espousing a contrary political stance, but as Afary and Anderson successfully allude, Foucault's particular response to Atoussa H. represents broadly the problems with cultural relativism and its relation to gender politics in general. It brings attention to the problems inherent in understanding the "other" through the Foucauldian lens, one which suggested that an Iranian's own opposition to the anti-modern stance of the Revolution was inherently inauthentic.

Interestingly, the debate continues today at the fault lines of interaction between liberal Western legal regimes and group rights initiatives in multicultural societies in Western Europe and Canada. Similar views have been expressed by proponents of Sharia courts in Ontario, Canada, who implicitly place authenticity in static notions of culture and disregard gender-based critiques against the implementation of Sharia as inauthentic and as products of Western imperialism.

THE critics of Foucault's stance towards the Iranian Revolution are interesting also because of their own position on the Western political and intellectual spectrum. Maxime Rodinson, France's leading authority on Islam at the time and an implicit critic of Foucault's effervescence in evaluating the Iranian Revolution, has been described by many of Foucault supporters as an "orientalist". It is this labelling that leads us to the central question that the book seems to ask: If "orientalist" discourses about Islam and the "other" were borne from, as Edward Said put it, a desire to facilitate the political project of colonialism and project essentially a "false" image of Arabs and Muslims, then what can be made of the stance towards the "other" represented by Foucault? Is this "other" orientalism the penchant to reify those aspects of the East that appear pre-modern, untainted by modernity or better still, a fitting antithesis to the modern world a better alternative?

Anderson and Afary's endeavour casts critical light on these very questions. In the quest for understanding, is the post-modern glorification of the "other" a valuable corrective to the repressive orientalist discourses that preceded it? Does either do justice to the reality of engaging the "other" devoid of predeterminations? Foucault's Iranian escapade seems particularly to raise these questions. As Anderson and Afary illustrate, the very notion of pre-modernity itself is a glorified fiction motivated possibly by the post-modern dissatisfaction with their own world, a world that takes for granted the advances of modernity in terms of individual freedom. Their thesis exposes the limits of cultural relativism in its inability to give credence to real desires for freedom and liberation that may be stymied by culture traditions reified for their apparent pre-modernity or "otherness" in relation to modernity. In essence, Afary and Anderson expose the "other" orientalism, a phenomenon perhaps as dangerous and disconcerting in its passive encouragement of fictive and retrogressive notions; their value is coined not in the cultures where they exist but in that of a West that nostalgically laments their loss.

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