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## Book reviews

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*Afary, Janet and Anderson, Kevin B.*  
**Foucault and the Iranian Revolution:  
Gender and the Seductions of Islam**

University of Chicago Press 2005 346 pp.  
£17.00 (paperback)

For many years, Michel Foucault's 'Iran writings' – a short collection of articles about the Iranian revolution published in the Italian and French presses during 1978 and 1979 – have been deprived of scholarly consideration. Foucault himself, disappointed by the Islamic revolution's authoritarian turn and beleaguered by criticism of his early enthusiasm for it, said virtually nothing public on the topic after 1979. Afary and Anderson have finally broken this silence with the publication of this ambitious book, which includes the first full appendix of Foucault's Iran writings in English translation. These are contextualized amongst interviews he gave about the revolution, other pieces of secular-left writing about the revolution, and critical responses to his articles from intellectual peers. The collection offers a font of new material which will be of interest to scholars of Foucault and Iran alike. However, the authors focus on theorizing, and criticizing, Foucault's personal attraction to the revolution; arguing that his own sexual politics and critique of European modernity led him to romanticize the Islamist approach to the revolution and misrecognize its masculinist and authoritarian elements. Their presentation of subjective limitations, biases and wish-fulfillments in Foucault's Iran writings is

largely convincing. In concentrating on these, however, the authors sometimes align themselves uncritically with his contemporary critics and fail to recognize the many ways in which Foucault's observations of the early revolutionary process were radically perceptive. Nevertheless, the project to explore the linkages between Foucault's subject positions and his reading of the Iranian revolution, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality, is highly worthwhile.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, Afary and Anderson make a persuasive case that the anti-modernist politics of the Iranian revolution, as well as its religious rituals and symbolism, resonated with Foucault's own critiques of modernity and liberalism. Indeed, alternatives to existing socio-political movements excited him: 'modernization as a political project and as a principle of social transformation is a thing of the past in Iran', he wrote approvingly in 1978 (p. 196). The authors also argue that Foucault was nostalgic for pre-modern social relations, which created an 'Orientalist subtext' in his work and prevented him from acknowledging authoritarian tendencies embedded in traditional forms of politics that were construed as alternatives to European modernity. This argument is somewhat less compelling as it is challenged by Foucault's articles themselves, which become increasingly critical and suggest that he was not naively 'seduced' by the Islamist movement. They rather suggest that he was intrigued by a

popular revolt against monarchism which he believed challenged all existing concepts of legitimate political change, and disappointed when its new forms of 'political spirituality' were routinized into traditional types of religious ideology. Regardless of debates over the interpretation of Foucault's texts, however, the authors' analysis of his Iran writings in the context of his other work is provocative.

The second part of the book concentrates on the articles themselves, specifically with regard to issues of gender and sexuality in Iran. Chapter 3 deals with major critiques of Foucault's work as he was writing. Chapter 4 continues this theme by exploring the controversies surrounding his positions after Ayatollah Khomeini assumed power in 1979, and concentrates on differentiating his analysis of the revolution from those of feminists and other activists writing at the time. Finally, Chapter 5 considers the (ir)relevance of these articles for contemporary gay and lesbian movements in the Muslim world. Each of these inquiries highlights previously unexplored dimensions of Foucault's work; Chapter 5 exposes masculinist limitations in his observations and discusses alternative interpretations of the revolutionary process from feminist perspectives. In this section, however, there is a palpable struggle between Foucault's approach to the revolution and the authors'; at one point they wonder why certain feminist thinkers 'have succeeded in arriving at a *more appropriately critical* stance toward the Iranian revolution' (p. 135, italics mine).

The parameters of this judgment are clarified in the epilogue, which both contextualizes Foucault's Iran writings in the recent history of political Islam and elaborates the authors' more normative project to 'transcend Islamism' (p. 172). Their discussion of 'Western leftist and feminist responses to September 11' is daring, though it exposes the authors' own biases against anti-imperial critiques of Islamic radicalism that do not prioritize gender. However, it does raise interesting questions about the dynamic meaning of political Islam. For example, if

women such as Shirin Ebadi (Nobel Peace Prize 2003) are indeed 'elements of a new feminist and more tolerant and democratic politics in Iran' (p. 176), particularly one which does not disrupt the western liberal consensus, does this necessarily imply that Foucault's notion of 'political spirituality' or his hope for alternative forms of political action should be rejected as naïve and illiberal? I think not, but also believe that the book enables us to debate these fundamental questions in a new and exciting way.

Overall, the book is well researched and organized; its theses are bold and original. There are, however, some criticisms of Foucault that I think the authors take too far. For example, they argue that he 'stood out in his celebration of [the revolutionary movement's] dominant Islamist wing, including the latter's rejection of Western Marxist and liberal notions of democracy, women's equality, and human rights' (p. 136). This image of Foucault as illiberal ignores his enthusiasm, recorded in his articles, about the development of new commitments to human freedom, approaches that he thought transcended the secular liberal and Marxist categories then dominant in French intellectual and political discourse. Foucault is also accused of collapsing all 'Islams' into a single idealised concept. To the contrary, his articles and interviews seem to express frustration that his peers were unwilling or unable to dissociate any form of Islam from authoritarianism and that they were thus prevented from seeing the revolutionary potential of religious faith and popular political will in modern society. Finally, what the authors identify as a weakness in Foucault's Iran writings – his inability or refusal to 'see ahead' to Khomeinism – may also be seen as a source of strength, albeit one with limitations. As a 'journalist,' Foucault endeavoured to capture the spirit of the movement, unfinished and unpredictable, as testimony to the fleeting reality of collective resistance and the creation of political alternatives. Nowhere does he claim to have captured this in its complex entirety; he was accused of 'ignorance' about Iranian society,

and he himself admitted to understanding it little. However, his willingness and courage to explore and defend the possibility of 'political spirituality' amidst cynical hostility and against the odds of institutional power politics is an important lesson to be learned from his encounter with Iran.

This book will be of keen interest to anyone interested in either the Iranian Revolution or Foucault, and particularly to those who have been waiting for a volume on Foucault's Iran writings. By providing the full appendix of these articles, it also lays the ground for further analyses of this rare collection.

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*Bearman, Peter* **Doormen** University of Chicago Press 2005 304 pp. £17.50 (paperback)

This is a book that can be thoroughly recommended, to newcomers to sociology, and to jaded lifers alike. Indeed even readers unfamiliar with the arcane orthodoxies of sociological codes will enjoy this warm, carefully detailed account of the world of New York's doormen. However, I would particularly recommend this book to any student who returns from the field claiming that 'nothing happened'.

'Residential doormen' are the uniformed custodians of New York's apartment blocks, and as such are the literal gatekeepers to a world that, as Bearman expertly shows, is as interactionally complex as the worlds of cops, gang members, drug dealers or any of the other usual suspects found in ethnographic monographs. For this reviewer, anything that can liven up sociology teaching is gold dust, and *Doormen* started life as a collaboration between Bearman and his students on an introductory sociology class. The end result manages to combine observation, interviews, and survey information, and succeeds in constructing a highly readable ethnography of the occupational role of doormen.

Doormen acquire a deep knowledge of what their tenants eat, what kind of movies they watch, whom they associate with, their drinking habits, and much, much more. Familiarity and social distance are constantly negotiated in the residential lobby, the arena where the ebb and flow of the building is both observed and shaped by a profession whose very status is in a state of eternal arbitration. Benign security and the everyday provision of the resident's needs and wishes can coincide or clash with those of the doorman. Distance and intimacy, professionalism and financial reward are played out in the residential lobby, while a constant battle is fought against the persistence and ingenuity of encroaching posters of take-away menus.

Like so many occupations, but resonating in particular with the experiences of patrolling police officers, doormen find their jobs both boring and stressful, with lurking supervisors ensuring that the art of looking busy is alive and well. At the core of this wonderful book is a section on the unwritten rules concerning the amount given to doormen by tenants as a Christmas bonus, which if revised as a script for a TV sitcom would be an obvious hit. The unspoken dialogue between doormen and tenants after a year of what may have been excruciating everyday transactions involving loneliness, alienation, or the mere delivery of pizza or pornographic video tapes, says much about contemporary urban sensibilities and class relationships. It is also enormously entertaining, conjuring up the best of Samuel Becket and Woody Allen, and injecting their observations with Goffmanesque insights.

This is a book about a very specific negotiated order, and Peter Bearman is to be congratulated for presenting his sophisticated analysis of that order in such a readable format. It is normal in academic reviews of this kind to highlight the specific readerships that would benefit by reading the book being reviewed. Everyone should read *Doormen*.

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