

East-Struck: Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson's *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution in Context*

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Introduction

In *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson argue that Michel Foucault's response to the Iranian Revolution was pivotal in the development of his later work. Central to this argument is the comparison Afary and Anderson make between Foucault's and Iranian Shi'ite Islamists' anti-modernism. In the late seventies, Foucault was already turning to pre-modern cultures as offering a way out of post-Enlightenment technologies of power and modern disciplinary institutions. Within this frame of mind, Foucault saw Iranian revolutionary practices of self-sacrifice, public penitence, and small-group agency as exemplary forms of resistance to the dead weight of modernity. Unfortunately, Foucault's enthusiasm for Islamist anti-modernism made him insensitive to some of the more nativistic (even fascist) and anti-feminist aspects of Iranian revolutionary ideology. In Foucault's late work (volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*), this same kind of insensitivity appears as reluctance to acknowledge the hierarchies of gender and forms of power at work in ancient Greece. Indeed, he was not immune to the seductions of utopian thinking. Foucault's late work is a search for an almost Heideggerian authenticity or what Foucault called the "irreducible."

What Afary and Anderson have accomplished in this book is, certainly, significant as a contribution to a history of ideas in the West. But their book can also

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be read in the context of a number of recent histories of Iranian intellectuals in the twentieth century.¹ Foucault's seduction by Islamist ideologies can be read as a strange reflection of Iranian intellectuals' use of European philosophical critiques of Western modernity to uphold a revivalist return to Islam after World War II. As Ali Mirsepassi has argued, for example, the Islamist revivalism of Ali Shariati in the 1960s both echoes and draws directly from Martin Heidegger's revivalist philosophy, and Iranian political culture of this period echoes more generally the political culture of Germany in the 1920s.² It is interesting to note, then, that the Orientalism Afary and Anderson associate with Foucault's writing on and after the Iranian revolution was, at least to some extent, informed by the Occidentalism of Iranian intellectuals' claims against what they described as the West's poisonous infection of Iranian culture. This Occidentalism was, in turn, influenced by what Afary and Anderson call the "Orientalist subtext" of much of Heidegger's writing on nonwestern pre-modern cultures. Reading Afary and Anderson alongside Mehrzad Boroujerdi, Ali Gheissari, Mirsepassi and others, points toward a compelling direction in this field of study: a comparative history of counter-modern philosophies in the twentieth century.

Summary

In Part I of *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chapters 1 and 2), Afary and Anderson build their argument around a central motif outlined in their introduction: the Karbala paradigm. In the month of *Muharram*, Shi'ite Muslims observe the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, Hussein, who, along with 72 followers, was killed by Yazid and his forces in 680 (CE) in the desert of Karbala. According to Shi'ite tradition, Yazid had usurped Hussein's rightful claim to the role of Imam, and thus this moment has become a mythic drama of justice versus tyranny. On the tenth day of *Muharram*, known as *Ashura*, Iranian Muslims observe Hussein's martyrdom through the public staging of *ta'ziyeh* passion plays, *rowzeh khani* (recitation), and *sineh zani* (self-flagellation). In 1978, Khomeini used the mythology of Karbala to label Mohammad Reza Shah as a Yazid and to rally the people around the cause of a justice deferred for thirteen centuries. The set of pre-modern grass-roots rituals associated with the Karbala paradigm, which emphasize performance and focus on the body, appealed to Foucault as comprising a new form of political spirituality that could potentially challenge modern technologies of power.

In Chapter 1, Afary and Anderson explain the basic affinities between Foucault's and Shi'ite Iranian Islamists' anti-modernism. They outline Foucault's highly

¹ The relevant works of Mehrzad Boroujerdi, Ali Gheissari, Ali Mirsepassi, Mohamad Tavakili-Targhi, and Farzin Vahdat are listed in the bibliography.

² In Chapters 4 and 5 of his *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization*, Ali Mirsepassi compares the modernizing ideologies of Islamic discourse in Iran in the 1960s to the discourse of nationalist nostalgia and revivalism prevalent among German intellectuals in the 1920s. He concludes that Iranian intellectuals' return to tradition in the 1960s is a phenomenon inherent within processes of political modernization (in Europe or elsewhere), and not a measure of Iran's cultural backwardness.

original contribution to modern philosophy: that despite its emancipatory claims, the Enlightenment produced: (1) increasingly minute forms of power that were productive rather than restrictive and that recruited individuals to police themselves, (2) a division of discourse into disciplines that linked knowledge to power, and (3) a re-imagined “body” subject both to power and knowledge through institutions of normalization. After summarizing critiques of Foucault (by Jurgen Habermas and a number of feminist thinkers), Afary and Anderson point out other paradoxes and problems in Foucault’s critiques of modernity. Most importantly, Foucault relied on a grand historical narrative that divided the modern from the pre-modern, and consequently produced an Orientalist mapping of cultures that divided East from West, but that seemed to merge the contemporary “East” (Japanese Zen-Buddhism, Shia Islam) onto the ancient West (Greece and Rome). This superimposition recalls, for the authors, a similar Orientalist subtext in Heidegger’s work. Thus, Foucault’s late work can be read in a longer line of Orientalist counter-philosophical discourse dating back even further, to Friedrich Nietzsche.

The second chapter returns to the Karbala paradigm as a rallying myth of the Iranian Revolution and an appealing set of practices for Foucault. The mythic narrative of martyrdom at Karbala offered Khomeini and his followers a way of imagining their own struggle as a timeless battle between justice and injustice. *Ta’ziyeh* plays were especially important for both Iranian revolutionaries and Foucault. For the revolutionaries, the communal drama of Hossein’s martyrdom offered a powerful model of revolutionary struggle. Foucault found this and other aspects of the *ta’ziyeh* ritual appealing: its often homoerotic subtext, its transgression of time and space, its suspension of gender roles, and its function as a cathartic acceptance of defeat and even death through public performance rather than private confession. *Ashura* performances of death and massacre seemed “irreducible” to Foucault. The problem Afary and Anderson point out here is that Foucault saw the revolutionary use of *ta’ziyeh* solely as an authentic grassroots phenomenon, and linked it to early Christian practices of exomolosis (public displays of penitence performed on the body) without fully acknowledging the more questionable aspects of martyrdom rituals in either Christian or Muslim contexts. While the Karbala paradigm did offer a culturally deep metaphor in support of revolution, its use was not free from political manipulation by clerical elites, nor was it entirely a pre-modern practice. Furthermore, Foucault either overlooked or downplayed the ways in which the Karbala paradigm demonizes Sunni Muslims as well as Jews, and how it insists on the obedience of women and children to men. Afary and Anderson argue that the nativistic and misogynistic aspects of the Karbala paradigm echo similar tendencies in Hungarian, Slovak, and Nazi fascist movements which use Christian myth to express contemporary nationalist resentment.

The second part of the book moves to a close reading of Foucault’s writing on Iran and responses to him (Chapters 3 and 4), an assessment of the impact of this writing on his subsequent work (Chapter 5), and what all this means for our understanding of the development of Islamist ideology since 1979 (Epilogue). Chapter 3 consists of close textual readings of Foucault’s articles on the Iranian revolution published before Khomeini seized power. In these early pieces, Foucault represented the revolution as a grassroots uprising against a corrupt regime whose

very attempts at modernization, and not the “backwardness” of the people, constituted the society’s “dead weight.” Foucault was prescient in predicting the success of the Islamists, but he was all too sanguine, even celebratory, about what this meant for Iranians, especially Iranian women and homosexuals, and, potentially, for the rest of the world. Gender was at the heart of the matter. For Foucault, the collective will of the Iranian people was a portent of the end, or at least the overturning, of modernity. Referring to a number of events—such as an *Islamiyeh*’s (grassroots Islamic council) response to an earthquake in the town of Tabas—Foucault depicted the Islamic wing of the Iranian struggle as an organic expression of the will of the Iranian people. However, he often overlooked the modern elements of Islamic discourse in Iran, and simplified the messy complexity of the Islamic movement, such as the historical links that *Islamiyehs* had to reactionary political movements in Iran. For example, the clerical reactions against the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and Mossadeq’s nationalist movement in the 1950s were, in both instances, motivated by a clerical rejection of calls for women’s increased rights. Foucault seems to have been uncharacteristically utopian in his depiction of *Islamiyehs* and other aspects of the Iranian revolution.

But his comments did not go unopposed. Chapter 3 also examines two important ripostes to Foucault’s correspondence from Iran. In a letter to the editors of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, an Iranian feminist writing under the pseudonym Atoussa H. accused Foucault of ignoring the plight of women under an Islamist regime and misunderstanding the cultural place of Islam in the lives of Iranians more generally. Similarly, Islamic scholar Maxime Rodinson, without naming Foucault specifically, wrote against Western intellectuals who ignored the dangers of Islam in their euphoric support for an anti-modern movement. Foucault showed an unusual interest in the “authentic,” or what he called the “irreducible,” a term that Afary and Anderson locate both within Foucault’s writing on Iran and in his arguments about pre-modern cultures in *The History of Sexuality* Volumes 2 and 3. For Foucault, the term “irreducible” meant an event that could not be contained within or reduced to the modern discursive statements and constructions of post-Enlightenment institutions of the state. In seeing the Revolution as irreducible, then, Foucault may have been uncharacteristically blind to how quickly the Islamic Revolution, which had been such a broad-based movement at first, developed a discursive and legalistic style no-less institutionalized than similar structures in the West.

The more reactionary elements of the revolution seem to have become institutionalized very quickly. Once Khomeini took power in February 1979, Foucault was addressed more directly by his critics, and in chapter 4, Afary and Anderson deal with the debates that resulted. The volume of Foucault’s writing on Iran diminished from February through April of 1979, but he seemed unapologetic about his earlier stance. Feminists, including Simone de Beauvoir, either challenged Foucault directly or spoke and wrote in support of Iranian women. In March 1979 Khomeini passed a series of laws that radically restricted the rights of women. Foucault seems to have been unfazed by these developments, or at least refused to “confess” his error. Foucault refused to condemn the Islamic revolution or retract his support of it, not even when lesbian feminist writer Kate Millet documented

attacks on and executions of homosexuals by the Islamic leadership. Afary and Anderson endorse most of the contemporary critiques of Foucault's unwillingness to address questions of gender, but they reframe Rodinson's posthumous thesis that it was Foucault's overly philosophical—rather than truly historical or sociological approach—that led him astray. Afary and Anderson argue, on the contrary, that it was not philosophy per se that was to blame, but Foucault's specific turn: a one-sided reading of pre- and extra-modern cultures as offering ways out of modernity. This one-sided understanding of the cultures Foucault presumed to exist outside of modernity led him to make at least two errors: he elided the difference between pre-modern and counter-modern, and tolerated some of the more questionable politics of nationalism and gender that these movements sometimes exhibit.

The fifth chapter connects the dots between Foucault's celebration of Iranian Islamist anti-modernism and his writing on sexuality in the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. For example, in his writing on ancient Greek homosexuality, according to Afary and Anderson, Foucault avoided or underplayed hierarchical, gendered, and even legal problems prevalent in Greek society. Afary and Anderson expose the gaps in Foucault's history, a history that overlooked the misogynistic and elitist ramifications of male–male patronage, homosexual relations, and homosocial hierarchies of ancient Greece. Foucault's reading of contemporary Middle Eastern homosexuality suffered from similar blind spots. He was correct, for example, in understanding homosexuality in the Middle East as a practice rather than an identity. And, in this sense perhaps, Middle Eastern societies lack the disciplinary technologies that force homosexuals in the West either to acknowledge and be cured of their "illness" or to confess and embrace their "identity." But he read this situation as implying that homosexuals in the Middle East enjoy a certain practical freedom in relation to their Western counterparts. While events in Iran and his conversations with secular Iranian intellectuals on the subject of homosexuality in Islam and the Koran must have given him pause about his own thinking on gender and sexuality in Iran and the Middle East, Foucault never fully retreated from his positions on Iran. The authors conclude that despite stepping back slightly from his more radical positions on the Enlightenment just before his death, Foucault's work after his exposure to the Iranian Revolution bears the imprint of the "seductions of Islamism" marked by an insensitivity to the politics of gender.

The book's epilogue explores the broader implications of Foucault's writing on Iran by providing a brief history of radical Islamism since the Iranian Revolution, and a survey of Western responses to it. Focusing on key events along the way—from the question of censorship and the case of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* to the different responses to 9/11 (including Jean Baudrillard's)—this history concludes with a discussion of contemporary Iranians' attempts to challenge Islamist ideology through various forms of dissent. Listing six cultural arenas (fashion, sports, religious deconstruction, secularism, feminism, and human rights), Afary and Anderson point to multiple sites of resistance. Recounting Shirin Ebadi's ecstatically celebrated return to Iran after receiving the Noble Peace Prize in 2003, Afary and Anderson call for wider recognition of liberal, dissident, and feminist voices speaking out against misogynistic and nativistic Islamism in Iran. At the same time, the book re-affirms those aspects of Foucault's work that continue to

inform both revolutionary intellectual movements in Iran and elsewhere, as well as Afary and Anderson's own genealogical analysis of Foucault as "author." The appendix comprises translations of Foucault's articles on Iran along with responses to him, including Rodinson's 1993 posthumous critique of Foucault's position on Iran. This one-hundred-page appendix is itself a significant contribution to a number of fields, including studies of Foucault, the history of Orientalism, and an understanding of the Iranian revolution.

Critical reflection and new directions

Afary and Anderson's book, especially its first chapter, suggests that Foucault's encounter with radical Islam in the Iranian Revolution can be read genealogically in a line of descent that goes back to Heidegger and Nietzsche whose critiques of modern Western thought and society led to Orientalist interpretations of Asian society and culture. But even more interesting is their suggestion—though only briefly explored—that Foucault's Orientalism can be read in relation to the Occidentalism of Iranian intellectuals, particularly Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati. Indeed, I would like to suggest that *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* can be read in the context of a number of recent books exploring Iran's intellectual history, and perhaps offer a re-assessment of Foucault in this context as well. In general, these histories suggest that Iran's turn to traditionalism is not strictly an expression of fundamentalism completely at odds with Western problems of modernity. Rather, Iranian revivalist philosophies have more in common with European revivalist movements than they do with a monolithic "Islam" whose "civilization" is said to "clash" with that of the "West."

A number of recent studies have attempted to read Iranian Islamist intellectual discourse as part of the history of modernity. Mehrzad Boroujerdi, Ali Gheissari, Ali Mirsepassi, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, and Farzin Vahdat have all explored questions of Iran's "intellectual discourse." Their books bear subtitles such as "Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity," "Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography," "Negotiating Modernity in Iran," and "The Tormented Triumph of Nativism." All of these histories, especially the work of Mirsepassi, suggest not only that Iran's key political intellectuals were influenced by the West, but also that "modernity" itself comes out of such encounters. Afary and Anderson's work extends and complicates this argument by suggesting that Western modernity is itself unthinkable without "other" modernities.

These works generally follow a line of writers and teachers including Ahmad Fardid (1912–1994), Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), and Shariati (1933–1977), among others, all either influenced by or responding to European existentialism and phenomenology, especially the work of Heidegger. These thinkers attempted to defend indigenous Iranian culture and identity by attacking modern Western society and its imperialistic presence in Iran and other countries in the developing world. Fardid, who studied in Europe, coined the term "*gharbzadegi*" (variously translated as Weststruckness, Westoxication, even Occidentosis) to identify a kind of Iranian inferiority complex in which Iranians aspired to all things Western, ignoring or

denigrating Islam. Al-e Ahmad made this idea more widely known in his book, *Gharbzadegi*. According to Boroujerdi, Fardid had been persuaded by “Heidegger’s views on the spirit of historical eras, the philosophy of being, and the imprisoning nature of modern technology” (Boroujerdi 1996, p. 65). Fardid “somehow conveyed” to Al-e Ahmad and others “Heidegger’s views on science and technology” (Boroujerdi 1996, p. 68). Al-e Ahmad made this idea popular and applied it specifically to certain aspects of the Pahlavi regime. Relying more on existentialist literature—especially Eugene Ionesco’s “The Rhinoceros” and Albert Camus’s *The Plague*—than on Heidegger, Al-e Ahmad outlined *gharbzadegi* as a pathology, an illness of the Iranian soul. At least one of Foucault’s interlocutors was aware of the influence of these ideas on Iran and on left-wing Western intellectual observers of Iran. Atoussa H., the anonymous Iranian feminist who took Foucault to task for his support of the Islamists, wrote: “The Western liberal Left needs to know that Islamic law can become a dead weight on societies hungering for change. The Left should not let itself be seduced by a cure that is perhaps worse than the disease” (Afary and Anderson 2005, v and p. 210). That Afary and Anderson use these words as the epigram for their book suggests that they, too, are aware of the interaction between Iranian Occidentalism (that sees the West as disease) and European *liberal* Orientalism (that sees the “East” as a cure to modernity’s ills).

I would venture to say that Foucault suffered from what might be called *sharghzadegi*, or East-Struck-Ness: the seductiveness of non-Western philosophies for Western critics of the Enlightenment. Among the circle of intellectuals attempting to cure Iran of its West-struck-ness, Shariati became “the main ideologue” of the Iranian Revolution, extending and expanding the *gharbzadegi* thesis. Shariati, in a series of books and lectures, had critiqued both ancient and modern Western philosophies as being founded on a basic metaphysical error: that the human is separate from the divine.³ After studying in Europe—and coming into contact with both Western philosophy and postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon—Shariati had given himself the religious-philosophical task of proving the superiority of an Islamic socialism to Western humanism, Marxism, or existentialism. The irony is that while Shariati’s critique of Western infiltration of Iranian Islamic identity included a critique of phenomenology, he was himself a philosopher in the mold of Heidegger. “Like Heidegger,” Mersepassi explains, “he [Shariati] felt a pervading religious background had slipped away and left people atomized from the ontological bond to their community.” Shariati’s “revivalism” was similar to Heidegger’s and drew on both Western and Islamic worldviews: “out of the dialogue he produced between Shi’ism and Western ideology, he ‘revived’ Islamic tendencies which perhaps never existed, but spoke to people’s contemporary needs in a traditional-symbolic language” (Mirsepassi 2000, p. 118).

Just as Heidegger dug into the ground of Western metaphysics, Shariati turned to what he saw as the metaphysical essence of Iranian identity: “Any formal knowledge is preceded” for Shariati, “with organic knowledge of context, i.e., social context, feeling, timing, etc.” According to Mirsepassi, this turn to organic

³ See, especially, Shariati’s essay, “On Humanism” in *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, pp.15–31.

knowledge is “comparable to Heidegger’s concept of mood as a basic structure of Being” (Mirsepassi 2000, p. 123). In one of his key essays, “Humanity Between Marxism and Religion,” Shariati turns directly to Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre in order to outline a political spirituality that would later draw Foucault to his work. Shariati writes:

Today, in philosophy, Heidegger does not speak in the (atheistic) terms of Hegel or Feuerbach. ... Heidegger is searching for Christ in humanity ... Today, in contrast to Marx, who felt human liberation depended upon the denial of God, and Nietzsche, who boasted, ‘God is dead,’ even an atheistic philosopher like Sartre speaks of God’s absence from the universe ‘with painful regret,’ seeing in this a source of the futility of man and existence, the loss of values. (Shariati qtd. in Mirsepassi 2000, p. 121)

It is important to note that Shariati studied under Foucault at the Sorbonne in the 1960s, and included a portrait of him in his autobiography in a chapter titled, “My Idols” (Mirsepassi 2000, p. 115). It is this same student of his that Foucault turns to in what is probably his most telling statement on the Iranian revolution: the essay “What Are the Iranians Dreaming About.” In this article, Foucault called Shariati the “shadow that haunts all political and religious life in Iran today” (Afary and Anderson 2005, p. 207). If the Shah was characterized as Yazid in the Karbala paradigm, then Shariati, who had died in 1977 after being imprisoned by the Pahlavi regime, was, for many Iranian protestors in 1978 and 1979, a new Hussein who, according to Foucault “died like a martyr, hunted and with his books banned” (Afary and Anderson 2005, p. 208). It is with the figure of Shariati that Foucault began to see a true political spirituality for which he had already been searching. In “Dreaming,” Foucault presents Shariati as the authentic hero of an irreducible world event.

Given these exchanges among Heidegger, Shariati, and Foucault, it becomes clear that histories of European philosophy and histories of Iranian political intellectuals involve episodes of productive cultural misrepresentation. In other words, Orientalism and Occidentalism produce the phenomena they purport to describe. This is Edward Said’s basic argument in *Orientalism*. What each side sees as a way out ends up being a feedback loop into the problems of its own troubled identity. For Heidegger, the “East” (as the closest contemporary heir to ancient Greece) provided a way of being in the world that could save the soul of the West from the ontological dead end of modern industrial society. For Shariati, Heidegger’s critique of modernity not only confirmed his view of the West as spiritually bankrupt, but also provided a model for digging in the ground of a traditional national culture. Finally, Foucault turned to Shariati (and the Iranian Revolution as a whole) as a symbol of political spirituality whose example could empower the West to wage its own revolution against modern technologies of power. Foucault’s misreading of the Iranian Revolution can be traced through these earlier productive cultural misrepresentations of “East” and “West.” Reading Foucault as they have, Afary and Anderson alert us to the potentially blinding ways in which Occidentalism and Orientalism act like two mirrors held in front of each

other. In this endless refraction, those left in the corners and the shadows seem to vanish from view.

Conclusion

Said famously used Foucault's notion of discourse in developing his concept of Orientalism, but differed with Foucault on the question of the influence of specific authors and individuals, of singular agents' contributions to and interventions in such discourse. In "Criticism between System and Culture," Said pointed out that

Foucault's flawed attitude to power derives from his insufficiently developed attention to the problem of historical change. ... he surely underestimates such motive forces in history as profit, ambition, ideas, the sheer love of power, and he does not seem interested in the fact that history is not a homogenous French-speaking territory but a complex interaction between uneven economies, societies, and ideologies. (Said 1983, p. 222)

Certainly, Foucault's eager interest in the singular political event that was the Iranian Revolution might suggest that Said overestimated Foucault's reading of history as homogenous. And Said would have been the first to admit that Foucault's theories of discourse are invaluable in analyzing and uncovering the minute workings of power. In fact, Said's critique of Foucault was part of his use of Foucault's ideas. Ultimately, what Said's approach suggests is that the best critique of Foucault comes from working through Foucault, and the best application of his concepts requires a degree of critical awareness of his limitations and lacunae.

Afary and Anderson offer a similar assessment of Foucault. In the very opening of their book, Afary and Anderson concede Foucault's usefulness for their critique of his later work. They quote Foucault on the question of the author: "The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (Foucault qtd. in Afary and Anderson 2005, p. 10). Afary and Anderson complicate both the author and the relations of power he courageously attempted to understand and lay bare. Despite his failings and his susceptibility to utopian thinking in his late work, much of his methodology provides the very tools for understanding these failings and susceptibilities. What's more, his understanding of the minute workings of power on the self continue to inform Iranians, themselves, as they resist oppression in a post-Khatami Iran, because structures of power in Iran include what Foucault, ironically, missed: *Islamist* technologies of self, a cure that has been worse than the disease.

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