

***Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism.* By Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005.)**

When the Shah of Iran was deposed on January 16, 1979, many Western and in particular French intellectuals greeted the event with cautious optimism. The massive urban uprising of several million people galvanized by a coalition of secular Marxists, Islamic clerics and leftist nationalists seemed to represent, to onlookers in the West, a significant new type of spontaneous and inclusive collective political movement. However, any enthusiasm for the revolution quickly waned as the coalition of secular and religious forces fell apart rapidly, turning into a form of clerical authoritarianism that was increasingly brutal in its suppression of political and religious opponents, women and other minorities. Some intellectuals were of course suspicious of the movement even prior to the toppling of the Shah. The eminent Islamic expert, Maxime Rodinson warned in December 1978 that the dominant trend within the revolutionary forces was “unquestionably a type of archaic fascism.” On January 22 the historian Le Roy Ladurie was already comparing the “chauvinist Islamism” of Khomeini and the clerics to the French Catholic fanatics who massacred thousands of protestants at the

end of the sixteenth century. And by early March, when the oppressive nature of the regime was manifest in its summary executions of gays and its abrupt revocation of women's rights, prominent feminists, including Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir, publicly denounced Khomeini and his fundamentalist regime.

Michel Foucault was the only French intellectual who did not join in any of these public condemnations and continued to idealize the revolution as the expression of a new form of "political spirituality" long after its reliance on terror was clear. In the period leading up to the revolution, Foucault visited Iran and met frequently with French and Iranian anti-Shah activists as well as with Khomeini himself during his exile in Paris. He also wrote regular reports for one of Italy's most respected daily newspapers, the *Corriere della sera*, on the events unfolding in Iran. In these columns, Foucault's admiration for the Iranian uprising centers upon the extent to which it represents a political movement that takes nothing from the principles of Western thinking. The anti-modernist sentiments catalyzed by the curious confluence of religion and leftist thought contravened Marxist stipulations on the necessarily progressive and class nature of revolutionary movement. Far from being the 'opium of the people,' religion in the context of the parasitic modernity of the Shah's regime was a galvanizing force and Foucault was particularly fascinated by Shiite rituals of martyrdom that were central to this emergent, and in his view, radical political spirituality.

While Foucault's naïve romanticization of the Iranian revolution embroiled him in huge controversy in France, many of his English speaking biographers have tended to downplay the episode as a lapse of judgment at odds with the political orientation of the rest of his work. Afary and Anderson argue, to the contrary, that rather than being anomalous, Foucault's views on Iran are predictable insofar as they consistent with other troubling tendencies that run through his entire oeuvre. Unlike his contemporaries, Foucault never engaged with the issue of colonialism and had a simplified grasp of the Muslim world derived mainly from his visits as a 'sex tourist' to Tunisia. His idea, not entirely unfounded, that Muslim societies were more tolerant of sexual relations between men than Christian ones rests, in Afary and Anderson's view, on a misguided refusal to see that the toleration of homoerotic culture is far from being the equivalent of the social and legal recognition sought by gay movements in the West. Such undeveloped ideas also inform his essentially apolitical analysis of the Iranian situation which he repeatedly characterized as an undifferentiated and "irreducible" populist force rather than as an uneasy alliance between different ideological factions. Afary and Anderson argue, rightly, that this exoticization of Iranian culture and, in particular, his fascination with the discourse of martyrdom, is yet another example of the problematic fetishization of liminal experiences that runs throughout Foucault's thought from his early work on madness to his final work on ethics of the self. The Heideggerian-Orientalist subtext to his own anti-Enlightenment sentiments leads him to set up a simplistic distinction between the modernity and its others where traditional societies – Iran, Tunisia, ancient Greece, pre-capitalist Europe – are reified and held up as some kind of antidote to the problems of the West. Perhaps, most problematic of all, is the way in which Foucault's profound and much noted indifference to issues of gender underpinned his extraordinarily naïve assessment of the Iranian situation. Afary and Anderson compellingly document how Foucault's persistent failure to register the blatant repression of women that started almost as soon as Khomeini came to power lies at the heart of his political misjudgment. It is only in his final public statement in *Le Monde* on May 11, 1979 that he makes a grudging and passing reference to the problem of "the subjugation of women and so on." From then until his death in 1984, Foucault said no more on the issue of Iran.

Afary and Anderson's book is a compelling and important contribution to the mass of secondary literature on Foucault. In a valuable appendix, they bring together all of Foucault's articles and public statements on Iran and the responses of other French intellectuals to his increasingly beleaguered position. Their account of the events leading up to the uprising and its immediate aftermath is lucid and enthralling. So too is their overall argument that Iran represents not a blip in Foucault's views but the logical extension of his more general Nietzschean tendencies. In comparison with the mass of textual evidence considered in relation to Foucault's views on Iran, their comparative discussion of the rest of his work is frustratingly slight and undeveloped. This means that, at points, some of their arguments are asserted rather than demonstrated, for example, the rather startling claim that, for Foucault, Khomeini personified a Nietzschean will to power. This is not the only overstatement that occasionally undermines an otherwise excellent book. They argue, for example, that the softening of Foucault's views, in his final years, towards the legacy of the Enlightenment was the result of the public chastening he received over Iran. There might be an element of truth to this but it is a rather reductive reading of his work that fails to consider his reworking of the critical ethos of the Enlightenment in conjunction with his contemporaneous analysis of neo-liberal techniques of government and his attempt to formulate some notion of resistant agency in the idea of an aesthetics of existence. Similarly, while there is some force to their argument that the final work on Ancient Greek ethics of the self exemplifies the troubling Orientalist tendency to uncritically celebrate the 'exotic other,' it overlooks the significance of Foucault's genealogical method which uses the past to denaturalize the present. It also does not sufficiently acknowledge the huge influence that Foucault's work on sexuality has had for progressive political movements, especially gay and queer activism. Nonetheless, Afary and Anderson's book is an important, engaging, and powerfully argued contribution to a field where it was hard to imagine that anything more of interest could be said.

**Lois McNay** is University Reader in Politics, Somerville College, University of Oxford. She is the author of *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (1992) and *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (2000).