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The philosopher and the ayatollah

In 1978, Michel Foucault went to Iran as a novice journalist to report on the unfolding revolution. His dispatches — now fully available in translation — shed some light on the illusions of intellectuals in our own time.

"IT IS PERHAPS the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and most insane." With these words, the French philosopher Michel Foucault hailed the rising tide that would sweep Iran's modernizing despot, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi Shah, out of power in January 1979 and install in his place one of the world's most illiberal regimes, the Shi'ite government headed by Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini.

Foucault wasn't just pontificating from an armchair in Paris. In the fall of 1978, as the shah's government tottered, he made two trips to Iran as a "mere novice" reporter, as he put it, to watch events unfold. "We have to be there at the birth of ideas," he explained in an interview with an Iranian journalist, "the bursting outward of their force; not in books expressing them, but in events manifesting this force, in struggle carried on around ideas, for or against them."

While many liberals and leftists supported the populist uprising that pitted unarmed masses against one of the world's best-armed regimes, none welcomed the announcement of the growing power of radical Islam with the portentous lyricism that Foucault brought to his brief, and never repeated, foray into journalism.

"As an Islamic movement it can set the entire region afire, overturn the most unstable regimes, and disturb the most solid," Foucault wrote enthusiastically. "Islam — which is not simply a religion, but an entire way of life, an adherence to a history and a civilization — has a good chance to become a gigantic powder keg, at the

level of hundreds of millions of men."

Foucault penned seven dispatches for the front page of the leading Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* as well as subsequent articles in French. But until the publication this month of Kevin Anderson and Janet Afary's "Foucault and the Iranian Revolution" (University of Chicago), which includes the first full translation of Foucault's Iranian writings, few of the English-speaking scholars who have otherwise pored over everything Foucault wrote and said have dealt with the episode at length.

Foucault's Iranian adventure was a "tragic and farcical error" that fits into a long tradition of ill-informed French intellectuals spouting off about distant revolutions, says James Miller, whose 1993 biography "The Passion of Michel Foucault" contains one of the few previous English-language accounts of the episode. Indeed, Foucault's search for an alternative that was absolutely other to liberal democracy seems peculiarly reckless in light of political Islam's subsequent career, and makes for odd reading now as observers search for traditions in Islam that are compatible with liberal democracy. But at a time when religion is resurgent in politics and Western liberals are divided between interventionists and anti-imperialists, Foucault's peculiar blend of blindness and insight about the Islamists remains instructive.

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When Foucault went to Tehran, he was France's dominant public intellectual, famous for a critique of modernity carried out through unsparing dissections of modern institutions that reversed the conventional wisdom about prisons, madness, and sexuality. In his most famous work, "Discipline and Punish," Foucault argued that liberal democracy was in fact a "disciplinary society" that punished with less physical severity in order to punish with greater efficiency. More broadly, his counternarrative of the Enlightenment suggested that the modern institutions we imagined were freeing us were in fact enslaving us in insidious ways.

In the fall of 1978, an escalating series of street

protests and violent reprisals and massacres by the Iranian police had placed the shah and the Iranian populace on a collision course. The uprising consisted of a broad coalition, including Communists, student leftists, secular nationalists, socialists, and Islamists. But by late 1978, the Islamists — directed by Khomeini from Paris, long a center for Iranian exiles — were the dominant faction. The shah abdicated in January 1979, and Khomeini returned to rapturous rejoicing on Feb. 1, 1979.

Foucault was virtually alone among Western observers, Anderson and Afary argue, in embracing the specifically Islamist wing of the revolution. Indeed, Foucault pokes fun at the secular leftists who thought they could use the Islamists as a weapon for their own purposes; the Islamists alone, he believed, reflected the "perfectly unified collective will" of the people.

The Iranian Revolution, Anderson and Afary write, appealed to certain of Foucault's characteristic preoccupations — with the spontaneous eruption of resistance to established power, the exploration of the limits of rationality, and the creativity unleashed by people willing to risk death. It also tied into his burgeoning interest in a "political spirituality" (by which he meant the return of religion into politics, a suspicious phenomenon in rigorously secular France) whose rise was then still obscured by the Cold War. These preoccupations made Foucault both more sensitive to the power of political religion, but also more prone to soft-pedal its dangers. In his articles, Foucault compared the Islamists to Savonarola, the Anabaptists, and Cromwell's militant Puritans. The comparisons were intended to flatter.

In an interview with an Iranian journalist conducted on his first visit, in September 1978, Foucault made plain his disillusionment with all the secular ideologies of the West and his yearning to see "another political imagination" emerge from the Iranian Revolution. "Industrial capitalism," he said, had emerged as "the harshest, most savage, most selfish, most dishonest, oppressive society one could possibly imagine." The failure of Communism, for which

Foucault had no great sympathy, left us, "from the point of view of political thought," he argued, "at point zero."

"Any Western intellectual with some integrity," he continued, "cannot be indifferent to what she or he hears about Iran."

To Anderson, a political scientist at Purdue University, Foucault's reckless enthusiasm for the Islamists seemed to contradict his public image. "We think of Foucault as this very cool, unsentimental thinker who would be immune to the revolutionary romanticism that has overtaken intellectuals who covered up Stalin's atrocities or Mao's," he said in a recent interview. "But in this case, he abandoned much of his critical perspective in his intoxication with what he saw in Iran. Here was a great philosopher of difference who looked around him in Iran and everywhere saw unanimity."

The authors dissect the shortcuts and evasions that led Foucault into his distinctive stance. For example, he accepted at face value the idiosyncratic reading of Islam promulgated by Ali Shariati, an Iran-born, French-educated sociologist who promulgated a militant Islamist ideology identifying martyrdom as the only true path to salvation. He also spoke of an Islamist ideology shot through with Western elements as if it were a unified and absolute Other. He accepted a mythological rendering of Shi'ism as a historical religion of resistance, when, in fact, it was imposed by authoritarian force upon Iran in the 17th century and had collaborated with authoritarian power more often than it had resisted it.

And Foucault never considers the rights of women in Islam until his very last disillusioned missive, which appeared in *Le Monde* in May 1979. When an Iranian woman living in exile in Paris named "Atoussa H." wrote a letter to *Le Nouvel Observateur* in November 1978 castigating Foucault for his uncritical support of a solution that could prove to be worse than the problem, he airily dismissed her claims as anti-Muslim hate-mongering.

In the event, Foucault's enthusiasm for the

revolution rapidly turned to disappointment. Early on, Foucault assured his readers that "by 'Islamic government' nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clerics would have a role of supervision or control," and that "there will not be a Khomeini government." A month after the Iranian electorate overwhelmingly voted to designate Iran an Islamic republic under Khomeini, the repression of women, political dissenters, and non-Muslim minorities that would characterize the regime was unleashed. In fall 1978, Foucault had praised the revolution's distrust of legalism. But in spring 1979, Foucault wrote an open letter to Khomeini's Prime Minister Bazargan, urging respect for the legal rights of the accused.

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Foucault, who died in 1984, refused to engage in public mea culpas, despite the fierce debate that broke out in France over his ideas about Iran. His final word on the affair, a 1979 essay titled "Is It Useless to Revolt?," acknowledged the revolution's wrong turn but reaffirmed the principle of revolt. Afary and Anderson, however, speculate that his later engagement from public issues and his revision of his earlier intransigence toward the Enlightenment were the signs of a man chastened by experience.

There is a long tradition of Western intellectuals going abroad to sing the praises of revolutionaries in distant lands and finding in them the realization of their own intellectual hopes. But the irony of Foucault's embrace of the Iranian Revolution was that the earlier intellectuals who had sung hymns to tyrants tended to share a set of beliefs in the kind of absolutes — Marxism, humanism, rationality — that Foucault had made it his life's work to overturn. Rather than pronounce from on high, Foucault sought to listen to what he took to be the authentic voice of marginal people in revolt and let it speak through him. In practice, this turned out to be a distinction without a difference.

Anderson says that the debate over these 25-

year-old writings has relevance when some leftists focus more energy on criticizing an administration they scorn than on speaking against a radical Islamist movement that also violates all their cherished ideals.

"It's not that radical Islamism is getting a pass from Western progressives and liberals, but it is the case that many are not being critical enough," says Anderson. When certain polemicists are spreading simplistic ideas about "Islamofascism," he continues, "there's a tendency to say that this isn't so. But the fact is that while radical Islamism has many features and faces, everywhere it is antifeminist, everywhere it is authoritarian, and everywhere it is intolerant of other religions and other interpretations of Islam."

"These conservative, reactionary movements," Anderson says, "may be in conflict with a conservative Bush administration — but that doesn't make them any less conservative or reactionary. The debate on Foucault helps to throw all this into high relief."

Other Foucault scholars also see an enduring value in his turn toward political spirituality. James Bernauer, a Jesuit priest who teaches philosophy at Boston College and has written several books on Foucault and theology, sees in the late Foucault's embrace of spirituality a resource for thinking about how to integrate politics and religion.

"Religious discourse has an enormous power to move people to take action, to see beyond their immediate self-interest," Bernauer says. "And Foucault had an ability to see this, to see past the pervasive secularism of French intellectual life, that was quite remarkable. For better or worse, political spirituality is with us, and Foucault was one who helped us to focus our sights on it."

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