

Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism.
By Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
312 pages. \$24.00.

Intellectual visions and harsh political reality do not always sit together, and the potential for serious errors of judgment increases when traditional academic caution and critique are thrown out in the fervor of transformative hope. The question, however, remains as to whether the aberrations in political judgment are precisely that or a deeper malaise at the heart of a thinker, especially in a thinker who connects thought with practice. Scholars of Heidegger have had to address such questions in relation to his involvement with fascism and, as Afary and Anderson speculate, Foucault scholars need to examine his erroneous journalistic reports of the Iranian revolution in 1978–1979—for the Italian *Corriere della Sera* and the French journal *Le Nouvel Observateur*—in a similar way. They believe his journalistic reports on Iran and his subsequent silence on the matter reflect a deeper problem at the heart of his intellectual project and his subsequent work. The central critical thesis is

that “the Iran writings express characteristic aspects of Foucault’s worldview” (9). Afary and Anderson’s work thus draws us to consider both the specific engagement of Foucault with Iran and the relation of this encounter with the aspects of his work at large. In raising these questions, Afary and Anderson carry out some important archival work and provide an invaluable service to Foucault scholarship by bringing together an extensive appendix of documents, including the full collection of Foucault’s journalistic reports and key contemporary responses to Foucault’s Iranian adventure. Although most of Foucault’s pieces are available in *Dits et écrits* (4 vols., Gallimard, Paris, 1994), this is a necessary companion in the unfortunately fragmented English translations of the latter volumes. The extensive appendix of documents is, however, not the full force of Afary and Anderson’s work. This is a polemical text that brings Foucault to task for his silence and seeks to find answers for such silence and the failed leftist aspiration for a positive revolution in the modern Iranian context.

Afary and Anderson’s polemical argument can be captured according to the following synopsis. Foucault’s interest in Iran emerges from his critique of modernity (chapter 1). He is further drawn into the situation by his fascination with the rites of penance and martyrdom in Iran, especially with his interest in the physical and violent nature of bodies (chapter 2). An account of his reports and understanding of the Iranian revolution shows his unawareness of the wider situation and his uncritical celebration of Islam as a political force in Iran (chapter 3). The reaction to Foucault’s reports and comments and the plight of woman in Iran reflect Foucault’s blindness to the central political dangers. Moreover, his view of an “oppositionless collectivity” in Iran was a “grossly inadequate theorization of Iran’s concrete social and political situation in March 1979” (chapter 4; page 125). Finally, Foucault’s lack of concern about the situation of women is coupled with a misunderstanding of homosexuality in Iran. This leads to the argument that Foucault’s Oriental sub-text in his *History of Sexuality* was “not a geographical concept”, but rather “included the Greco–Roman world as well as the modern Middle East and North Africa” (chapter 5; page 138). These “naïve” attitudes led one commentator, Tunisian sociologist Fathi Triki, to remark: “French intellectuals are very exacting concerning specialized knowledge, except on Islam.” (141). As a kind of contemporary confirmation of Foucault’s error, the epilogue highlights the diversity within radical Islam from the Iranian revolution to September 11 and the mixed response to Foucault’s work by dissidents in Iran.

The argument is bold. Although some of its insights provide necessary contextual analysis, the authors unfortunately get carried away with imaginative speculation, especially in chapter 5. The patchwork of assumptions and the language of guesswork sometimes undermine the credibility of the position. Foucault is “quite likely,” “seemed to,” “may have been,” and there is “some evidence” and “perhaps” this or that response (137, 139, 162). Foucault’s silence opens up the imagination through which he can be condemned or critically understood. The work could have been more balanced by holding to its excellent archival and historical work, rather than speculating about links to Foucault’s

other writings, but there is a very real political struggle behind this study, which—like other texts, including those of Foucault—leave behind academic precision in the concern for the cause. Political ambitions may never be able to share the privileges of the academy.

However, the critical force of Afary and Anderson's text and its timely publication relate to a profound question at the heart of modernity—that is the relation of critiques of modernity to constructions of pre-modern "religious" traditions. This is an important critical edge of contemporary studies in religion and theology and reflects an ideological struggle in relation to religious discourse both within and outside the discipline. Afary and Anderson argue that Foucault not only "privileged pre-modern social relations over modern ones," but that his view was a "one-sided critique of modernity" that minimized the "harsh and confining disciplinary practices of the pre-modern world" (26). Although careful to recognize the positive aspects of political spirituality in Central and South America, the work tends to polarize a complex understanding of religious tradition by arguing for the "nonspirituality of those Iranians who wanted to live, to experience freedom to live in this world" (132). Although Afary and Anderson are right to note the "binary schema" that silences these groups in Foucault's work, they themselves are not free from a similar binary opposition between modernity and religious tradition, which results in an awkward framing of the debate.

The concept of political spirituality in Foucault should, for example, be read through the wider, and more complex, theological sub-text in Foucault, rather than in his intellectual failure to understand Iran (30). Foucault's concept of political spirituality has more to do with his understanding of Christian history and western politics, not least Catholicism, than Iran or Islam. In this respect Foucault should be seen as misreading specific contexts and traditions rather than being condemned across all aspects of work in the transferability of concepts. The desire to see a unity in the writer and texts is to miss the value and errors of the "specific intellectual," who makes interventions rightly or wrongly into historical events. Afary and Anderson clarify Foucault's errors, silences, and omissions in the Iranian reports, but this does not require the unnecessary "speculation." Such moves cloud not only an understanding of Foucault but also the wider place of religion as a potential force for social justice as well as oppression. Despite his cultural and political blindness about Iran, Foucault offers us great insight into the processes of political subjectivity and the place of religion as a political force in both—so-called—secular and religious worlds. The utilization of aspects of Foucault's work by feminists and contemporary Iranians shows that texts and people can be of value even if there are instances of intellectual or personal failure. In the end despite its exuberant imagination and a lack of appreciation of the context of religion in Foucault, this work offers an important contribution to the Foucault and religion debate, because it opens up the central issues of pre-modern and modern critical consciousness and the place of religion in our modern political worlds.