

## POLITICAL THEORY

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

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— Valentine M. Moghadam, *UNESCO*

Michel Foucault is the man who gave us trenchant critiques of modernity in books such as *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality*. His arguments about the body, power, and knowledge have influenced a number of interdisciplinary studies and created a generation of “Foucauldians.” However, one set of his writings has been decidedly unimportant: the set pertaining to the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79. Those journalistic essays—written for the Italian and French press (*Corriere della sera* and *Nouvel Observateur*)—are the subject of this fascinating and comprehensive volume by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson.

In his writings on the Iranian revolution, Foucault referred to “the dead weight of modernity,” mocked Iranian technocrats, and said that all philosophy had to be rethought (p. 78). On the demands of the revolutionary movement, Foucault maintained: “One thing must be clear. By ‘Islamic government,’ nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clerics would have a role of supervision or control. . . . It is first and foremost about a movement that aims to give a permanent role in political life to the traditional structures of Islamic society. . . .” (pp. 206–7). He also confidently opined, “There will not be a Khomeini party; there will not be a Khomeini government” (p. 98). In contrast to Foucault’s position, the Soviet press had termed the demand for an Islamic government in Iran “dangerous” (p. 214). In “A Powder Keg Called Islam,” the last article he wrote for *Corriere della sera*, he correctly noted the global reach of Islam, but with a certain admiration rather than hesitation, according to the authors (p. 108).

Afary and Anderson have written a wide-ranging book that covers much ground in five chapters plus a lengthy appendix of annotated translations of Foucault’s writings on the Iranian Revolution and his critics’ responses. The authors address these key questions: Why was Foucault so enamored of the “political spirituality” of the revolution against the shah? Why did he turn a blind eye to the issue of women’s rights?

This book has a special resonance for me because in the early fall of 1978, residing in Washington, D.C., and involved in the Iranian student movement against the shah, I had come across the left-wing French philosopher’s writings in the *Nouvel Observateur* lauding the Islamic wing of the Iranian Revolution. I was bewildered by his approach and fully agreed with the pseudonymous Iranian feminist

Atoussa H. who, in a letter to the *Nouvel Observateur*, took Foucault to task for his inability to understand the danger behind an Islamic political order. A few years later, I was equally stunned to find many Western intellectuals and academic writers, and not just French ones, similarly mesmerized by the actions of the tribal-Islamist Mujahidin in Afghanistan, then fighting a modernist, left-wing government. Elsewhere, I have attributed the wrong-headed support for the Afghan Mujahidin to anticommunism, cultural relativism, and the anti-Enlightenment fad of the 1980s.

Now Afary and Anderson explain Foucault’s mistaken sympathy for the Khomeinist wing of the Iranian revolutionary movement in terms of his philosophical critique of modernity, including humanism and the Enlightenment. His poststructuralist stance, opposed to the purported authoritarianism of the modern, secular liberal state and its institutions, made him vulnerable to the seductions of revolutionary Shiism Iranian-style and uncritical of Islamism, and led him to prefer Iranian “political spirituality” to French-style secularism.

Keenly interested in premodern religious rituals, such as penance rites and passion plays, Foucault was evidently mesmerized by the Ashura processions in Tehran (as described and contextualized in Chapter 2). What is more, Afary and Anderson identify a certain “romantic Orientalism” (p. 142) in Foucault’s writings and show how he was seduced by Islamism/Shiism. In extolling the “absolutely collective will” of the “mass” or “the people” who marched against the shah, Foucault demonstrated no sense of differentiation or divisions within the population (p. 123). Indeed, he engaged in a certain “exoticizing of Iranian culture as an oppositionless collectivity defined by its absolute difference from modern Western societies” (p. 125). Last but not least, they find his homosexuality salient. Foucault was conceptually concerned with gender and the body. However, in his case, the gaze and analysis focused on men, to the utter neglect of women or feminist issues. Thus, when Atoussa H. penned her critique of his writings and of Islamic law, his response was to show disdain for her position.

The book’s feminist analysis of Foucault’s writings is one of its major strengths. Chapter 4 provides an excellent discussion of events that have been largely forgotten: the women’s protests of March 1979 in Tehran and the international responses. Afary and Anderson remind us not only that Foucault was unconcerned about feminist concerns, but also that Edward Said wrote disparaging remarks about Simone de Beauvoir’s involvement in an international fact-finding mission on the women’s protests (see discussion pp. 116–17). In the next chapter, Afary and Anderson examine Foucault’s writings on the history of sexuality to draw attention to the way he neglected women’s sexuality and take him to task for not applying his theory

of biopower to man-boy relations in ancient Greece. They also point out that it is in modern times that there have emerged critiques of pederasty, child marriage, and polygamy (p. 160). Their conclusion: “Foucault’s Orientalist impressions of the Muslim world, his selective reading and representation of the Greco-Roman texts, and his hostility to modernity and its technologies of the body, led him to prefer the more traditional Islamic/Mediterranean culture to the modern culture of the West. Perhaps he hoped that the revival of traditional culture in Iran under an Islamist government could lead to a less restrictive counter-discourse on bodies and sexualities” (p. 162). Afary and Anderson contrast Foucault’s naiveté on these themes with the work of Maxime Rodinson. A prominent French Marxist historian and an expert on Islam and the Middle East, Rodinson described Khomeinism as “a type of archaic fascism” (p. 99, see also p. 102) and maintained that Foucault had “placed excessive hopes in the Iranian Revolution” (p. 270). The Iranian sociologist Ehsan Naraghi also reported to the authors that his own warnings to Foucault about the Khomeini wing of the revolution had gone unheeded. Foucault only began to concede discomfort with the revolution, in print, in May 1979, months later. He was recalcitrant, however, when he was chastised by his compatriot Paul Martin in an article entitled “Foucault, Iran, and Responsibility” (p. 120).

The lessons of Michel Foucault’s views on the Iranian Revolution have not been lost on Iranian leftists and other dissidents, the vast majority of whom are hardly Foucauldian. Indeed, Afary and Anderson quote the dissident journalist Akbar Ganji—recently released from prison—as explaining that “in our society, nostalgic fundamentalists are happy to use postmodern thought in their attempts to reject modernity” (p. 174). In opposition to such a perspective, Afary and Anderson enact, and defend, a resolutely modern form of humanist egalitarianism. In this respect, their book, centered on the Iranian situation, gestures far beyond it and joins some of the liveliest debates animating contemporary political theory.

**Pursuing Truth, Exercising Power: Social Science and Public Policy in the Twenty-First Century.**

By Lisa Anderson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

176p. \$29.00.

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— Stephen T. Leonard, *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

The large question looming over this series of lectures by Lisa Anderson is the perennial problem of the relationship between social inquiry and political practice. Her engagement with this issue takes the explicit form of parsing the political—and specifically the *public policy*—aspirations, achievements, and failures of American academic social science from its founding in the late nineteenth century to

the present. None of this is new territory, and Anderson’s debt to the historical and analytical work of many (for her, mostly contemporary) scholars is both obvious and readily acknowledged (p. x). However, it is not really Anderson’s intent to make a contribution to the historical or philosophical literature; rather, this is an argument with a definitively presentist goal, namely, understanding the conditions that define (as the title of her book intimates) what it means to be committed to a *public role for scholarship and scholars* today.

Anderson takes the promotion of the “public” or “common” good to be the constitutive end of bringing together social science and public policy, and for her, the story of how the academic social sciences have tried to meet this challenge turns on the ways that social scientists relate to “the state,” how they understand their “science,” and how their “liberalism” has informed (sometimes explicitly, but mostly implicitly) their inquiries. These themes ground her narrative reconstruction of four crucial moments in the genesis of our present condition: the late nineteenth-century founding of the social sciences “on behalf of, but outside, the public sector” (p. 41) in the modern research university; the mid-twentieth-century “mobilization” of social science by the state; the “retreat” of the social science community back “into the university and their disciplines” (p. 31) prompted by reactions (beginning in the 1960s) to state and academic complicity; and, finally, the “democratization of social research” that has followed on “the retreat of the state and the marketization of public policy that marked the last several decades of the twentieth century” (p. 76).

Anderson’s account of the first three of these developments (in Chapter 2) is rather tenuous, and historians of the social sciences will find some of her central interpretive claims misleading, and others anachronistic. For example, her suggestion that the founders of the social science disciplines had “an abiding affinity with liberalism in their questioning of authority, . . . celebration of the individual, . . . [and] skepticism about (not to say hostility toward) the state” (p. 41) simply does not square with the work of historians of the social sciences (most notably John Gunnell and James Farr) showing that these—especially political science—were disciplines explicitly about and specifically intended to engage the public good *through* “the state.” Moreover, the attribution of “liberal” values to various disciplinary founders would be difficult to sustain on a careful reading of the literature at the turn of the century; even Dorothy Ross—whom Anderson frequently cites as a historical authority—offered a carefully qualified and subtle account of the “liberalism” of early social scientists, and for her, the “republican” character of their ideals was more important in explaining their reformist impulses.

Other historiographical and conceptual quibbles could also be cited, but doing so would miss the point of