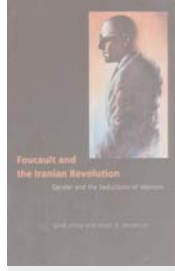


# Engaging Islam and postmodernism

S a e e d U r - R e h m a n



**“Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism”**  
By Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson;  
The University of Chicago Press, 2005;  
Pp 312; price \$24

**M**ichel Foucault was so many things at once that one cannot assign him any singular position. Often considered a dandy and an enigmatic philosopher, Foucault was an original, extremely disturbing thinker and an unforgiving historian of philosophical systems. From his book *Madness and Civilization* to the third volume of *History of Sexuality* (he died while the fourth volume was in progress), his oeuvre displays an uncannily astute critical and subversive engagement with everything that Western civilisation has held sacred since the Enlightenment: sanity, the independent rational self, the human subject, progress, the medical gaze, the invisible watchman who watches the criminal, the judge, the sovereignty of the state, capital punishment, and human sexuality.

Combined with his philosophical and historical inquiries was his own energetic life as a political activist, which defies easy categorisation. He conducted his doctoral research while living in Sweden and lectured in Tunisia, while disturbing many leading thinkers of France and America. After his works were published, Sartre seemed irrelevant and boring. Noam Chomsky felt the heat during a live interview on Dutch television. Here was a philosopher who wanted to demolish all certitudes and examine their political underpinnings. Chomsky's bewilderment is on record: "I'd never met anyone so totally amoral." Foucault was amoral but not immoral – because he was trying to produce a new ethic where the self is conscious of its work on itself, instead of behaving like a conduit of received opinion.

It was this engagement with the possibility of producing a new kind of ethics and politics that attracted Foucault, as a journalist, towards the Iranian revolution. In Iran, Foucault witnessed unarmed people trying to dethrone a government which maintained one of the biggest armies in the world. He declared the Iranian revolution an expression of a new kind of "political spirituality." He was impressed with Shiite Islam and its collective role as a unifying force for the people of Iran. He noted with lyrical overtones how the dead (martyrs of Karbala) exercised their power over the living (the Shah) and inspired the people to transform their soulless lives. He was also intrigued by the Leftists joining the revolution and demanding an Islamic government. It was his philosophy in action: people were erasing old categories and trying to create a new political reality.

Foucault was enthralled. This was his mistake as a "Western" philosopher. His fascination with the political possibilities of religion, especially Islam, earned him many diatribes. Soon, the Iranian episode in his philo-

sophical career was labelled by his peers as a "mistake." Foucault was only too aware of the trap. After the revolution produced an Islamic government in which the clerics had ultimate authority, he withdrew from the debate. Yet he never admitted that his fascination with Iranian Islam was a mistake. In this situation, he displayed a Nietzschean distrust of all guilt-producing philosophical systems. He was neither going to confess nor be whipped by any judges of human thought. He wrote some letters of protest to the post-revolutionary leaders in Iran and moved on to other philosophical pursuits.

By the time he died in 1984 at the age of 57 with AIDS-related complications, Foucault had become the most important figure of the later half of the twentieth century, and whatever he had produced was being compiled and translated into English – except his journalistic writings on the Iranian Revolution. In this way, the volume being discussed is perhaps a most valuable document. As part of the appendix, it has the first complete collection of all of Foucault's writings on Iran in a single volume in English. But it is also the first book-length study of Foucault's engagement with the Iranian Revolution. To this end, the book is a very important addition to the ever-growing archive of Foucauldian scholarship.

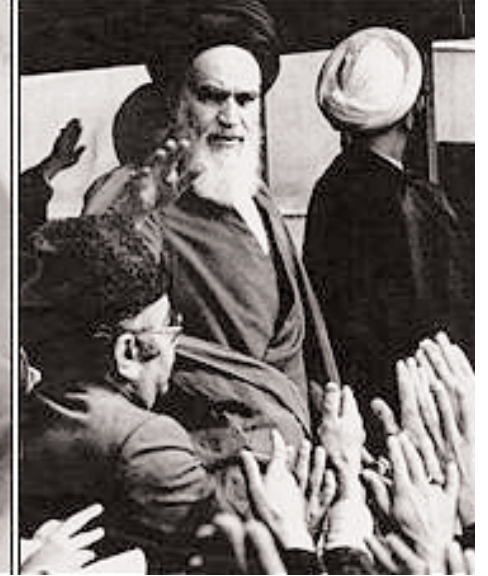
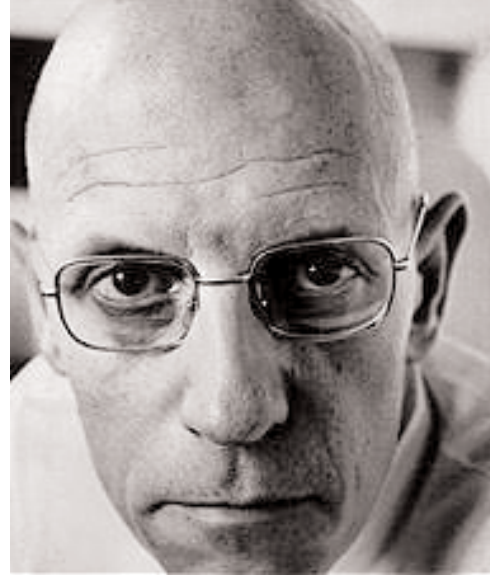
As far as political theory is concerned, however, the book has a score to settle against Foucault. Both Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson find fault with Foucault because he praised a religious and political system which eventually contributed to further oppression of women and non-Islamic minorities. For this reason, this book becomes even more important. It becomes an exemplary illustration of non-Western

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and oppressed subjects' reactions to the non-committal attitude of Western postmodern theory. Foucault was against all great causes, simplistic avowals of master narratives, and grand emancipators: he preferred what he called microphysical subversions. The authors of this book have no tolerance for this dangerous flirtation with ambiguity because they believe in the validity of emancipatory concepts such as "freedom," "human rights," and "equality." Therefore, they have produced a polemic

against Foucault. As a polemic, then, it is a rigorous work of critical scholarship that illustrates how Foucault ignored the reactions of Iranian scholars and continued his own exploration of the manifestations of the popular will to political power. Towards this end, it makes a fascinating read.

Considering the current global political fault-lines, one notices that this book deals with two strands of political thought: the Marxist tradition of global emancipation of all subjugated peoples and the postmodern fascination with Islam as an antidote to Western imperialism. It is so topical that it could not have been published at a better time. While the US is in Iraq, while the French are experiencing racial riots, while draconian laws are being passed in Australia against immigrants and refugees from non-Western countries, while the present Iranian government is displaying signs of nuclear adventurism, the authors of this book have



**Foucault declared the Iranian revolution an expression of a new kind of "political spirituality"**

taken it upon themselves to handle the powder keg. Whether we remain ambiguous and subversive only in our everyday life and continue to hope that the grand exploitative march of Western civilisation will soon undermine itself or whether we decide to take care of our collective freedom, this book cannot be ignored by any politically engaged person from Islamic or Western political spaces.

As for Foucault, he did not want to have any philosophical and political identity because, to him, remaining the same self could not be separated from the government-

tal management of our national identity cards. He aspired towards total facelessness: "Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write." In his kind of political theory and practice, Foucault was successful. In their type of engaged politics, Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson are extremely successful and present their argument forcefully. They both deserve kudos for managing the powder keg so well. ■