

Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism

JANET AFARY and KEVIN B. ANDERSON

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The bar for being recognized as an expert on Islam has never been set particularly high. When that is combined with writing about a not oft-visited country, the consequences can be particularly disastrous. As Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson show in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, in the case of the French philosopher this combination led to horribly inaccurate predictions about the outcome of the Iranian revolution and the nature of political Islam, as well as the decline of the thinker in the eyes of the French intelligentsia.

Afary and Anderson provide an historical introduction to Foucault's intervention in Iran, putting in context the little known details preceding the Islamic revolution, which appeared to many Western observers almost *ex nihilo*. In 1978–79, a series of mostly urban protests broke out against the government of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Viewed by his own people as a brutal dictator and an anti-Islamic Western puppet, Pahlavi had been installed in power by a CIA-backed coup that overthrew the nationalist government of Mohammad Mossadegh. Upset about the confiscation of British petroleum interests in Iran, the British successfully appealed to the American government for its help in installing a more pliant government in Tehran. As the revolution began to spread, Foucault went to Iran as a special correspondent for the Italian daily *Courriere della sera*, and later for the French *Nouvel Observateur*, first in November 1978 and then again in 1979. These articles, by-lined Tehran but actually written after Foucault's return to Europe, describe the role of religion in creating what Foucault labels a new "political spirituality" that would alter the "global strategic equilibrium."

Combining a detailed commentary on Foucault's intervention in Iran, alongside the first English translation of Foucault's articles—which have long been available in French and in Persian—as well as those of some of his critics (including Simone de Beauvoir and the French scholar of Islam Maxime Rodinson), Afary, a scholar of Iranian history, and Anderson, a sociologist of left-wing movements, show that contrary to any assumption that Foucault's well-documented hostility to grand narratives and utopianism might make him suspicious of the Islamic revolution, he was willing to suspend his disbelief, at least in part, because of his other interests. In particular, they stress that his interests in the power of traditional narratives (in this case, combined with modern technology) to fight modernity led him to find hope both in the narratives of the well-established Shiite rituals that surround Muharram and in the cult of

martyrdom that increased in size during and following the revolution. Afary and Anderson argue, very persuasively I believe, that Foucault succumbed to the same sort of Orientalist beliefs that are to be found in Nietzsche and Heidegger. One of my few complaints about this book is that it could have benefited from a greater discussion of the Western Orientalist tradition—particularly in France—that is so well documented in Edward Said's body of work. It is very possible to argue that Foucault's own reading of Eastern traditions is highly influenced by the school of French Middle Eastern studies that Said analyzes.

After the discussion of Foucault's support for the Revolution, and the contents of his articles, the authors identify two particular themes for discussion, both of which turn on the question of gender as it has been understood in the West for the past generation. In the two chapters on women's rights in Iran, Afary and Anderson show how secular intellectuals and feminists were co-opted by the radical clerics associated with Ayatollah Khomeini, and discuss in great detail the reposts to Foucault written by Atoussa H., an Iranian feminist whose article attacking Foucault was published pseudonymously, and Maxime Rodinson, a French professor of Islamic Studies. They detail Foucault's problematic relationship with feminism and compare it with the disastrous effects the revolution had on the rights of women in Iran.

In the last chapter, Afary and Anderson close with a discussion of male sexuality. The authors argue that Foucault's understanding of homosexuality in the Muslim world was tainted by his inability to see forms of power capable of operating on the body other than those found in the Western sciences of sexuality, which he had analyzed in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Moreover, they argue that in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault, by looking to the Greco-Roman world, was trying to find an equivalent for the ethics of love he believed to exist in contemporary Muslim countries. For that reason he was blind to the dangers the Iranian revolution posed to sexual minorities. They write: "Up to a point, Foucault was correct in his observations that Muslim societies have remained somewhat flexible on same-sex relations. But such a limited form of acceptance, which involves total closeting, is not the same as the recognition sought by the modern gay and lesbian rights movement" (139).

Foucault never responded to his critics, with the exception of two dismissive letters (both reprinted in the anthology), one to Atoussa H., and another to the intellectuals Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, who had criticized Foucault in the pages of *Le Matin*. In fact, after a somewhat critical open letter to Iranian Prime Minister Medi Bazargan, Foucault remained quiet on the subject for the five years that remained of his life.

Ultimately, the two authors have done a huge service to the intellectual world. Not only have they collected and translated previously unavailable documents concerning Foucault's involvement in Iran, they have provided a useful discussion of the themes, dominant in Foucault's work, that rise to prominence in his discussion of the revolution. More important, they have showed the danger not of intellectuals commenting on politics but of poorly thought out, sloppy, and ill-informed Orientalism. This alone makes their book a timely intervention.

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Music and Philosophy

GABRIEL MARCEL

Trans. Stephen Maddux and Robert E. Wood

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"Philosophical thought can no longer, without being in danger of losing all its effectiveness, be dissociated from a reflection on the work of art," Gabriel Marcel insists, and the works he reflects on are most frequently musical ones (135). As Robert E. Wood explains in his introduction to these collected essays, the analogy that Marcel himself develops to explain the primacy and centrality of music to his thinking is a geographical one: his philosophy is the continent, his plays are the off-shore islands, and music is the sea out of which they both emerge. Maddux and Wood's aim in making these essays available to English-speaking readers is to correct critical inattention within the philosophical community to the inextricability of music and philosophy in Marcel's thought. In doing so, they also hope to draw philosophical attention to the ways in which music can both model and contribute to a richer awareness of the world in which we find ourselves. Marcel contends that music provides this basis through the sense of connectedness that one can get from participation in community. Indeed, participation is the very thing that, for him, characterizes our human project, a more social and ethically engaged existentialism than the caricature that comes down to us through popularizations of Jean-Paul Sartre's thinking.

The essays contained in this volume were written over a span of forty-five years, from 1920 to 1965, and they clearly reflect Marcel's engagement with the phenomenology and existentialism that dominated European philosophy between the interwar and post-World War II eras. Wood notes that Marcel's philosophical reading of Roman Catholicism, rendering his faith into a more accessible philosophical discourse, bears a