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Reviewed by Babak Rahimi (Literature Department, University of California, San Diego)
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What is Happening

Michel Foucault (1926-84), historian, philosopher, and activist, was one of the most influential intellectual figures whose works have had an enormous impact on various fields in the humanities and the social sciences. His writings on authorship, power and knowledge, medicine, the prison system, and psychiatry not only defied general interpretive categories, but also escaped a unifying schema through which one could attain a reducible sense of his overall arguments. Each of Foucault's writings is an act of transgression, testimony to an anti-transcendental imagination that contravenes established conventional norms (especially academic ones), challenges the harmonization of theory and the homogenization of conceptions and practices, and pushes the limits of rationality by imposing new boundaries.

Foucault wrote his books, like *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), in a way to challenge limitations set by the specific terrain of disciplines or the normative domain of ideas. As Foucault pointedly remarked, "I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area.... I would like the little volume that I want to write on disciplinary systems to be useful to an educator, a warden, a magistrate, a conscientious objector. I don't write for an audience, I write for users, not readers."[1] And it is precisely in the context of such desire for the transfiguration of the normative, experimentation with the commonplace carried out through an exercise of everyday insubordinations that Foucault aimed to offer a series of critical works on European modernity.

Whether studying his views on the history of madness or the practices of modern medicine, Foucault's main concern lay in the normative relations of experiences, the technologies of domination and the truth-seeking discourse of modernity, with its hegemonic (and self-applauding) claim to validity and its triumphalist vision of history that characterizes it as a break with tradition. Though his late texts from the 1980s offer a revised conception of modernity as an ethical-philosophical movement (Enlightenment), for Foucault, modernity (at least in its Western European form) identifies a regime of power relations that is constituted in the proliferation of discourses and various disciplinary practices through social institutions.

Transgression in terms of an act of disrupting certainties of conventional norms plays a central role in redefining the boundaries of modernity. "Problematization," as Foucault once told his research assistant François Ewald, is central to his thoughts as "the ensemble of discursive and nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and the false and constitutes it an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis or the like)."[2] It is with the transgressive act of "problematization" that Foucault is able to engage in a conceptual game to challenge the history and ideas of modernity by questioning, disclosing, dislocating and interrupting discursive and nondiscursive practices so as to show the multiple and contingent trajectories that render unintelligible a monolithic model of sociopolitical processes.

Respective to this spirit of thinking, the Iranian Revolution (1978-79) provided Foucault a new opportunity to broaden his problematization of modernity. The mass-based revolution, with millions of participants (both men and women) and which in the course of fifteen months brought down the autocratic regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979), presented Foucault with the possibility of breaking down the binary logic of modernity that pits "tradition" against "modernity" and "religion" against "progress." During his two visits to Iran, one in September 1978 and another in November 1978, Foucault was able to advance his problematization of modernity by describing the Iranian revolution as a new

form of "political will" to which no other revolutionary movement can be compared (p. 221).

Describing the revolution in 1978 (this was *before* the Khomeinists established the Islamist government), Foucault was keen to portray the new movement as a "rejection of the regime," something that negates rather than affirms power, something that "strikes" and "demonstrates" while including (almost) everyone in Iranian society. Despite its diverse make-up, the movement nevertheless "constitute[d] a perfectly unified collective will" since it accommodated numerous groups and organizations who were united in their opposition to the Shah's regime.

It is in this regard, and only in reference to an *indeterminate* social movement, that Foucault identified the Iranian revolution in 1978 as a "political will," a will for "political spirituality" that "yearns for the end of dependency, the disappearance of the police, the redistribution of oil revenues, an attack on corruption, the reactivation of Islam, another way of life, and new relations with the West, with the Arab countries, with Asia, and so forth" (p. 221). Here, the "reactivation of Islam" does not imply a reintroduction of religion into politics or a return to "traditional society" or the archaic Islam of the medieval era, but a political experiment to overcome the secular conception of modernity that imposes a rigid boundary between "religion" and "politics"–hence the description of Islam as "another way of life" that would not separate the two. According to this assertion, the "political will" is not bound or destined to establish a new political regime, but the "will" itself, manifested in the strikes and demonstrations of many Iranians, is one of "breaking away from all that marks their country and their daily lives with the presence of global hegemonies" (p. 222). What this yearning shows is the sheer desire for breaking from the existing secular political orders that sets the Iranian revolution apart from other social movements around the globe.

Even Foucault's 1978 description of Khomeini underscores this interruptive dimension of the revolution. "Khomeini is *not there.* For the last fifteen years, he has been living in exile and does not want to return until the shah has left. Khomeini *says nothing*, nothing other than no–to the shah, to the regime, to dependency. Finally, Khomeini *is not a politician*" (p. 222). Foucault's November 1978 description of Khomeini is crucial to the way he understood the unfolding of the revolution that unforeseeably (and tragically) led to the dominance of the Khomeinist-Islamist faction in 1979. Since he did not envision an autocratic Islamist regime emerging out of the revolution, Foucault was mostly (and perhaps only) interested in the eruptive and interruptive dimension of the revolutionary movement, the problematizing force of the revolution which Khomeini best embodied– *prior* to becoming the clerical ruler of the Islamist regime in 1979. The Iranian revolution was about "no," a no that would open up a new discursive and nondiscursive site for an alternative modernity, the "form of revolt that is the most modern" since it seeks to transfigure western modernity through a revolt for something altogether new (not archaic or traditional), a new form of modernity, perhaps an Islamic modernity.

By and large, Foucault's (mostly journalistic) writings on the Islamic world and particularly the 1979 Iranian Revolution are less known to general readers and specialists alike in the English-speaking world. But now with the publication of *Foucault and The Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, we are provided with an invaluable translation of the late philosopher's works, as well as the critiques of many who responded to his writings on the Iranian revolution.

With a total of five chapters, the book is divided into four parts: one focusing on Foucault's general theory of modernity and tradition; another describing his views on the Iranian revolution; an epilogue; and, finally, an appendix that brings together all of Foucault's writings (and those of his critics) on the Iranian revolution. Chapter 1 offers a general theoretical explanation as to why Foucault became interested in Iran and how his allegedly uncritical views on the Islamists and the Iranian revolution were closely tied to his postmodernist critique of modernity. In this chapter, Afary and Anderson make the astonishing claim that "the difference between the Foucauldian grand narrative and the liberal or Marxian ones is that Foucault's narrative privileges not modernity but the traditional social orders" (p. 14). Chapter 1 continues to describe Foucault's troubled relationship with feminism and his views on corporeality and the death drive.

Chapter 2 offers an historical and analytical description of the Shi'i Muharram ceremonies, celebrated in commemoration of the martyrdom of Muhammad's grandson, Hussain, in the 680s C.E.., while explaining Foucault's stance towards the political use of the rites of penance by the clerics to establish an Islamist political order. In addition, the chapter also presents a gender-oriented (though highly problematic at times) interpretation of the rituals while describing the events that led to beginnings of the revolution prior to September 19, 1978.

Chapter 3 describes the sociopolitical conditions that led to the Iranian revolution, though it gives no serious account of the conditions that gave rise to the Islamist movement in Iran. It is in this chapter that Afary and Anderson contextualize Foucault's writings on Iran during the course of the revolution until the period when the shah's regime was overthrown. The chapter provides an interesting exchange of articles between a leftist Parisian-Iranian woman, Atoussa H., who criticizes Foucault's uncritical stance towards the Iranian Islamists, and Foucault, followed by a brief (and unfair) depiction of Foucault's response to Atoussa H. The remaining part of this long chapter is devoted to the writings of the French Orientalist Maxime Rodinson, whose critique of Foucault provides more ammunition for Afary and Anderson's claim that Foucault not only was uncritical but also supportive of the Islamists' efforts to establish–to use Rodinson's term–an Islamist regime of "archaic fascism."

Chapter 4 focuses on the Foucault/Rodinson controversy as Afary and Anderson endeavor to cast critical light on Foucault's disregard for women's condition in the course of the revolutionary events that ultimately led to the victory of the Islamists. Also, they discuss Foucault's failure to acknowledge his "uncritical enthusiasm" for the revolutionary movement and later in the chapter criticize his final writings published in May 1979. Chapter 5, perhaps the most interesting and yet the most problematic part of the book, turns to the issue of male homosexuality. Here, they argue how Foucault naively "lumped together premodern Western societies and modern Oriental ones" (p. 139) by uncovering his later writings on the ethics of love and linking them to his troubled relations with feminism and even orientalist sentiments.

The epilogue opens with a (rather simplistic) overview of Islamist groups and factions that have arisen since September 11, 2001. This section presents a descriptive though sketchy overview of Islamist movements that overlooks their variety and historical complexity while (correctly) emphasizing the dangers inherent to Islamist ideological and political movements. This chapter offers a fine description of the way Foucault's writings have been criticized and utilized by various reformist and secularist Iranian thinkers in the post-revolutionary era. I believe this is one of the best parts of the book and it merits serious attention.

With the exception of Jonathan Ree's in *The Nation*, reviews of *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* have been generally positive. In one case, a reviewer applauds Afary and Anderson for their "engaging" and successful critique of Foucault's "embrace of the Islamist rhetoric, with its beguiling attire of tradition, spirituality, anti-modernism and anti-imperialism."[3] While criticizing Foucault's postmodern "glorification" of the "other"–the pre-modern traditional society of Iran–as a cause of his "blind" appraisal of the revolution, the reviewer praises Afary and Anderson for exposing the "limits of cultural relativism in its inability to give credence to real desires for freedom and liberation that may be stymied by culture traditions reified for their apparent pre-modernity or 'otherness' in relation to modernity."

However, what Afary and Anderson reveal in this book is their own "orientalist" views which, through accusations and hostile misreadings, aim to contort, suppress and, ultimately, silence Foucault's original interpretation of the Iranian revolution. Having depicted a belligerent and even (yes!) an anti-modern Foucault, who was allegedly unapologetic for the Islamists' atrocities after the revolution, for which "he had helped to build support" (p. 133), the book misleadingly presents Foucault as an educated (though stupid) white man who was naively seduced by the obscurantist features of Khomeini and Islamism.

The sad truth about this book is that it is replete with selective and discriminatory (and at times highly misleading) readings of Foucault's statements, which only does a disservice to fair and balanced scholarship. Afary and Anderson systematically misread specific parts of Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution by attributing to Foucault himself (on the basis of mere unfounded assertions) views that his texts explicitly deny. At the end, what this book achieves is simply the injection of the authors' own peculiar Eurocentric secular biases concerning politics and religion into Foucault's writings, producing a highly distorted study of the late philosopher's views on a non-European social historical movement.

One issue in particular that struck me as a significant problem with the book was the way the authors decontextualize Foucault's immediate situation and spontaneous reaction in observing the unfolding of the Iranian revolution. This disregard for the immediate context allows Afary and Anderson to portray Foucault as an uncritical supporter of the Islamist movement, who failed to predict the dangers inherent to the Islamist movement (in its Shi'i Iranian version). But Foucault clearly rejects such a rigid conception of the historian who can (or should) hypothesize a unity in social historical time,

foreseeing both the perils and progress of history. We find his most basic justification for rejecting conventional approaches to history in his recognition of the incompleteness (or indeterminacy) of human action. He writes, "I cannot write the history of the future, and I am also rather clumsy at foreseeing the past. However, I would like to grasp *what is happening*, because these days nothing is finished, and the dice are still being rolled. It is perhaps this that is the work of a journalist, but it is true that I am nothing but a neophyte" (p. 220). Foucault's concern for the "*what is happening*" authenticates his general approach to understanding the history of the past and the future as an indeterminate and chaotic process. In this sense, he did not reflect upon the Iranian revolution as a teleological process that would (or should) eventually lead to a democratic or an autocratic outcome (I will later return to this point). He was more fundamentally concerned about the phenomenon of revolution in terms of the aesthetics of action, the sort of action that is free from constraint of power, and liberated into an open world of possibilities without a determined end.

This interest in the here-and-now, however, does not suffice to condemn Foucault for not foreseeing the dangers of the Islamists groups participating in the revolution, since, as Foucault explained in 1978 (as the revolution was unfolding), history is open-ended and to define it in teleological terms is to claim authority over something that is fluid and changing. Here, Foucault remains true to his ethics of transgression, defying systematic thought and remaining a novice observer by embracing the world of uncertainty and recognizing the nonlineal nature of time and disjointed space. In doing so, he also challenges any claim to absolute knowledge of the past and the future, which Afary and Anderson so boldly make in their analysis of the historical development of the Iranian revolution.

Moreover, what this book reveals is the rigidity of secular thinking, its blindness to its own tendencies toward exclusive and reductive thinking while dismissing alternative voices and conceptions of political ontology that may not mirror the secular political disposition. As Talal Asad has demonstrated, secular sensibilities not only signify a political doctrine that reifies the "secular" as a distinct historical category, but also perpetuate a Eurocentric form of domination in globalizing new systems of knowledge and new practices, including governance and rigid conceptions of "religion," as a distinct historical category. In a play of conceptual dichotomies, the authors engage in a similar line of secular conceptualization as they repeatedly fall afoul of some of the most reductive secular modernist ideas of modernity. The volume is swamped with the use of secular binary terminologies such as "tradition" versus "modernity," "traditional societies" (Iran) versus "modern societies" (France), and "Islam" versus "democracy." In some instances, the authors even uncritically interchange terms such as "secularization," "modernization," "westernization" and "modernity," as though these highly contentious terms can be easily assumed to be one and the same.

Here, under the veil of secular rhetoric, lies an orientalist discourse that conflates "Islam," as a set of historical and social traditions, diverse and irreducible in time and space, with "Islamism," as a distinct modern fundamentalist and populist movement manifested in variety of forms from the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries. In this study, the reader will find no analytical and comparative interpretation of the Islamist phenomenon and the actual historical-sociological conditions which gave rise to such movements, their distinct Jacobin features and their ambivalent attitude to tradition, from the early 1970s to the events that led to the Iranian revolution. Islamism is simply a recent form of "fascism," which suddenly surfaced on the social scene as a mere reaction to modernity (or "modernization"). This claim is, at best, a provocative slogan and, at worst, a shallow account of Islamism with no significant claim to originality.

Subsequent to this line of orientalist thinking, the study falls short of elaborating (or even acknowledging) Foucault's understanding of multiple-Islam while completely overlooking his fascinating critique of modernization (at least in its Pahlavi version) described in his famous October 1978 article in *Corriere della sera* entitled "The Shah is a Hundred Years Behind the Times" (pp. 194-98). Furthermore, when writing on male homosexuality in chapter 5, they uncritically lump together various practices of (male) homosexuality within a cultural region of the "Muslim world." Here lies a subtle orientalist bias. While criticizing Foucault for harboring orientalist sentiments in his admiration for the "Mediterranean/Muslim world," Afary and Anderson apply a more problematic orientalist language in their uncritical use of terms such as "traditional Middle East" and "Muslim societies," as though "Islam"–understood as a set of dogmatic legal discourses–identifies the cultural praxis of an imaginary region called the "Middle East" (see p. 156 for the application of the term "Islam" as a paradigmatic cultural logic of the "Muslim societies").

But it is perhaps according to this orientalist perspective that Afary and Anderson so conspicuously admire Atoussa H. and her critical remarks on Foucault. When

reading chapters 3 and 5 together, one senses a curious total disregard for Atoussa H.'s vulgar orientalism, as the authors endeavor to belittle Foucault by accusing him of failing to acknowledge "an Iranian voice that was less religious" (p. 82). But if Anderson and Afary refer back to Foucault's letter in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, they may notice that he was not criticizing Atoussa H. for being an "inauthentic" Iranian, but questioning how this Parisian-Iranian woman could reduce the revolution to a fanatical movement while she so fanatically ignored the dynamics and the complexity of the revolution. For the most part, Atoussa lived in Paris, not Tehran, not Isfahan, not Kermanshah, not Mashahd. She most certainly did not have any actual daily interaction with the many revolutionary women (both religious and secular) who participated in the revolution for various purposes and objectives. What Foucault found troubling about Atoussa's assertion was how she could uncritically lump together all those Iranian revolutionaries (men and women, including even some secularists) who were demanding an Islamic government (not knowing of course what such a government would really look like) with those Islamists who did indeed represent "religious fanaticism."

Foucault expands on this point when he notes in his exchange with Atoussa H. that her letter "contains two intolerable things: (1) It merges together all the aspects, all the forms, and all the potentialities of Islam within a single expression of contempt, for the sake of rejecting them in their entirety under the thousand-year-old reproach of 'fanaticism"' (p. 210), this passage says just what Foucault wanted it to say. He correctly points out the orientalist position of this Parisian-Iranian woman, who reduces "Islam" to a Quranic passage that has been variously interpreted, and even at times ignored, by diverse Muslims in different historical and social settings. I believe it is here where Afary and Anderson truly reveal their own orientalist tendencies as they uncritically make Atoussa H. the exotically authentic Iranian women, while disregarding the way she so antagonistically applies an orientalist discourse in reducing the Iranian Revolution to a fanatical religious phenomenon.

Moreover, there is an element of poppycock in the teleological conception of revolution, a disturbingly paradoxical modernist bias which views social movements as a set of organized actions that are mobilized either by elites or socioeconomic forces to achieve a certain end. Ultimately, Afary and Anderson's analysis of the Iranian Revolution fails to capture its chaotic, creative vitality, its sociopsychological and spontaneous dimensions as it unfolded in a nonlinear fashion toward an unforeseen end–the collapse of the Shah's regime. We are offered a detailed historical description of the events that led to the revolution from 1978 to 1979, but given no account of the impulsive forces, the unprompted actions of the participants that made the revolution utterly unpredictable, even to those diverse Islamist groups whom Afary and Anderson peculiarly assume to have known its consequences, as though the entire event was cunningly predicted and designed by them to institute a religious autocratic state.

"Politics," Foucault remarks, "breathes well only where this will is multiple, hesitant, confused, and obscure even to itself" (p. 212). This is the essence of the "political will" that made the Iranian revolution a creative event: its obscurity, its confusion and the fog of collective interaction in bringing about total change. Did the Islamists or any other political group vying for power, while united in opposing the monarchy, know or plan the exact methods and the ends of the revolution? Did the Iranian revolutionaries, even some of those secular feminists involved in the demonstrations who shouted, "Death to the Shah" or "Islam, Islam, Khomeini, We Will Follow You," ever anticipate an Islamist state, as we know it now in the early twentieth-first century?

This teleological conception of political action can be detected in other parts of the book. For instance, on the role that the Shi'i commemorative ceremonies of Muharram played in the later phase of the revolution, the authors write, "what Foucault witnessed in Iran was the result of a carefully staged and crafted version of Shi'ism that had been first developed in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the authoritarian modernization of Muhammad Reza Shah's government" (p. 40). What this statement overlooks though is the spontaneous eruption of resistance, the carnivalesque characteristics of the Muharram rituals during the revolution (and even in its pre-Pahlavi form), which provided arenas of public dissent in the performative course of the ceremonial commemoration of Hussain's death. The revolutionary development of the Ashura festivities embodies a carnivalesque quality that embraces all the participants in demonstrating that another world outside of the present, the here-and-now, is possible. What this also suggests is that the Ashura rituals were devoid of any direct clerical involvement in the management and the organization of the processions. This is a major point that the authors fail to recognize.

Here is how the book's study of Islamism can be summed up. The tide of tyranny that followed the revolution was a necessary outcome of the movement, because (now here is the circular argument) the Islamists (regardless of their diverse ideologies) were anti-women,

anti-democratic and anti-modern. There is nothing original about this argument. Remarkably, the book's main message mirrors that of some recent Iranian-American literary works, like Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which equally downplay the creative dimension of the Iranian revolution in favor of another reductive depiction of revolutionary (men and women) activists. In this simplistic view, modernity and democracy exclude Islamism, and Islamism excludes feminism; there are no in-betweens and no overlapping realms, no cross-fertilizing realities, no hybrid terrains of socio-political mobility, but only two opposing forces that ultimately clash with one triumphing over the other.

For their positive effort, let us say that Afary and Anderson have provided us an invaluable service in translating and making more widely available Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution. In *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, the reader can find a wealth of primary sources that can certainly benefit many students and scholars of Foucault and the Iranian revolution. But in light their criticism of Foucault, I invite the respective authors to re-read one of Foucault's statements in their book. Responding to his critics, he recalls the words of Maurice Blanchot, one of France's most influential literary theorists, "who teaches that criticism begins with attention, good demeanor, and generosity" (p. 250). Had Foucault lived, he would have perhaps added that criticism should end, however, with a fair assessment of the subject under study so that such evaluation would not merely reinforce preconceived biases and reductive conceptualizations.

Notes

[1]. Michel Foucault, "Prisons et asiles dans le mécanisme du pouvoir," in *Dits et Ecrits: 1954-1988*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 523-524.

[2]. François Edwal, "Le Souci de la vérité," p. 18; Thomas Flynn, "Foucault's Mapping of History" in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 37.

[3]. See Rafia Zakaria, "The 'Other' Orientalism," *Frontline* 22, no. 26 (2005), available at http://www.flonnet.com/fl2226/stories/20051230001007500.htm.

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