

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

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'Les extremes se touchent,' goes a well-wrought French phrase. The value of this insight has not escaped a growing number of contemporary critics of what can be called a kind of marriage between postmodernism and religious fundamentalism. Recent writers like Meera Nanda in her book *Prophets Facing Backward* (2003) have explored the relationship between postmodern critiques of science and the rise and proliferation of religious fundamentalisms, arguing that the critique of scientific rationality that postmodern thinkers put forth as a left-wing attack on social domination and power goes hand in hand with right-wing political and cultural projects. [1] Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont skilfully picked apart the nonsensical approach of postmodern thinkers to science and mathematics in their book *Fashionable Nonsense* (1999), revealing postmodern thought as lacking any understanding of science or scientific rationality and therefore possessing no real ability to make a substantive critique of it. [2] These writers share a common concern to defend reason and science from the dismissive approach of postmodern thought. And there is something to be said for this new defence of rationality, the Enlightenment and even science as a means to revive a left political discourse that can reclaim the political project dedicated to political equality, human rights and social justice.

Janet Afary's and Kevin B. Anderson's *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* is another, superb addition to this discourse. It is a book that situates the problems inherent within postmodernism – here specifically in the thought of Foucault – and what the authors refer to as the 'seductions of Islamism.' Their central argument is that Foucault's theoretical views allowed him to embrace a politics – radical Islam as it manifested itself in the Iranian revolution of 1979 – which was wholly against the goals and imperatives of the tradition of progressive politics. There exists a 'perplexing affinity' between Foucault's theoretical ideas and the fundamentalist ideology that inspired the Iranian revolution. 'Both were searching for a new form of political spirituality as a counter discourse to a thoroughly materialistic world; both clung to idealized notions of pre-modern

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social orders; both were disdainful of modern liberal judicial systems; and both admired individuals who risked death in attempts to reach a more authentic existence' (p. 13.) Indeed, they argue that although Foucault's oeuvre is marked by a discourse that is hostile to grand narratives, totality, and modernity as a whole. Foucault should be seen as embracing the totalising ideology that radical Islam was presenting to the world, one that still has consequences today both in Iran and in the West.

Between 1978 and 1979, Foucault wrote a series of articles for the Italian daily *Corriere della sera* that analysed the Iranian revolution but also expressed his own central ideas about politics. Seizing on the fact that these writings have been almost completely untranslated into English, and have not entered into the discussion about his work in America, the authors tell us that they reveal 'characteristic aspects of Foucault's worldview.' (p. 9) But the authors also make important arguments about the nature of postmodernism and its relationship to politics and the post-9/11 political and intellectual climate.

Foucault's interest in the Iranian revolution was driven, the authors argue, by his search for a merger of politics and spirituality, or what Foucault himself called 'political spirituality.' This meant that Foucault and the radical Islamist movement that would culminate in the revolution shared three core, overlapping 'passions': an opposition to imperialism and colonialism, a rejection of modernity, and 'a fascination with the discourse of death as a path toward authenticity and salvation' (p. 39.) These three points of commonality would shape Foucault's interpretation of the Iranian revolution and lead him to interpret the anti-modernism of Khomeini and his coterie as a liberating political impulse against domination, power, and against the Enlightenment rationality and the institutions of modernity that had, in his view, plagued western consciousness, culture and political life. If Foucault's intellectual project had always been to eliminate the 'fascism of the mind,' as he termed it in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* in 1968, then radical Islam offered a counter-discourse not only to western modernity itself, but also to the 'liberatory' grand narratives that had also succeeded only in reproducing domination, such as Marxism and liberalism. The reason for this was Islam's return to an authentic sense of self, one that was mobilised against the dominating forces of modernity. Islamism's return to the pre-modern was a means to attack what was modern. Foucault and the Iranian revolution were, it seems, almost made for one another.

Foucault's obsession with modernity lies in the nature of his critique of power as an all-encompassing reality of modern life. In the late phase of his work, he began to develop the Nietzschean theme of the ubiquity of power and domination. Power was not something located in any given place and did not spring from a single source but was embedded in every crevice of modern life. It was no longer explicit, as it had been in the pre-modern world, where public executions and torture had been commonplace, to wield dominion over individuals. Power was now implicit, woven into the very fabric of our language, thoughts, and desires. Marxism was therefore mistaken in seeing power as a function of capital. Instead, power was embedded in the seemingly unending web of social relationships, in discourse, and in the very ways that modernity structured the self. Anti-modernism for Foucault was therefore a result of his pervasive condemnation of western rationality and of any hint of its ability to liberate humanity. This theoretical position, the authors claim, led Foucault to embrace the anti-modernism of radical Islamism, even though the Islamists cultural and political program would simply end up erecting more brutal and explicit forms of social domination.

Foucault himself was explicit in his admiration of the Islamists in his articles on the Iranian revolution. Reacting against modernity – as the radical Islamists were – was cast as an act of liberation, of the opening up of a new path that could serve as a guide for merging the spiritual and the political. Modernisation, as well as modernity itself, should be seen as a thing of the past, and this was what the Iranian revolutionaries were exemplifying. Foucault argued that, 'recent events did not signify a shrinking back in the face of modernisation by extremely retrograde elements, but the rejection, by a whole culture and a whole people, of a modernization that is itself an anachronism' (p. 80.)

The affinity between Foucault and the radical Islamists was not just a question of theory but of concrete politics. The authors explore the sharp contradiction between the practice of Islamism regarding women's rights and Foucault's own long-held views on social domination. As Khomeini consolidated his political power so clerical power was established and fundamentalist Islamic laws began to be enacted. Forced to wear the chador and excluded from much of public life women were suppressed. Foucault remained unapologetic for his lauding of the Iranian revolution. This becomes a fascinating dimension of the book since Foucault's silence on the subject becomes a point where the authors can discuss the wider political fallacies of Foucault's ideas comparing his silence on the suppression of women's rights with the more active and critical role of feminists like Kate Millet and others.

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The fallout over Foucault's writings on Iran and the revolution came fast, and it was severe. Foucault was attacked in reviews and editorials in the most prominent French magazines and newspapers. When he was openly critiqued for his enthusiastic acceptance of the Islamist movement in March of 1979 in an article in *Le Matin*, Foucault's response was pathetic to say the least: 'throughout 'my life' I have never taken part in polemics. I have no intention of beginning now.' (p. 120) The attacks continued and were relentless, but Foucault insisted that the events in Iran were in fact unique and he continued to evade a direct confrontation with his critics on the substantive issues of Islamism and the type of politics that he expressed in his coverage of the revolution. In the end, the authors tell us, Foucault's writings on Iran have had a lasting impact on his reputation in France, unlike in America, where he is still sympathetically treated and, even, enthusiastically received.

Those interested in contemporary social theory in general and Foucault in particular will be well-served by Afary's and Anderson's critical treatment. But in the end, the book's wider relevance lies in the way that they are able to problematise the political elements of postmodern thought. In their epilogue, 'From the Iranian Revolution to September 11, 2001,' they evoke the words of the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard and his reaction to the attacks of 9/11 when he wrote that the attack 'represents both the high point of the spectacle and the purest type of defiance,' which meant, in Baudrillard's view that 'it could be forgiven' (p. 170.) Foucault's enthusiastic stance with respect to the implications and realities of the revolution in Iran – seeing it as an 'authentic' reaction to western imperialism and the encroachment of modernity – can therefore be seen lingering in many aspects of postmodern thought more broadly, even today.

It is not so much Foucault that is the issue, but the ways in which irrationalist anti-modernist worldviews can click together and postmodern theory can become quite barren of political insight and conviction. Ignoring the core values that have come from the most progressive wings of liberalism and socialism – tolerance, equality, the rule of law, the realisation of human rights, etc. – this intellectual tradition has undermined much of left politics. Today when rational left politics has been on the defensive in the midst of rising conservatism in the developed west and the emergence of fundamentalisms of different stripes in the developing world, Afary's and Anderson's analysis takes on a special, indeed urgent relevance for our times.

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References

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Notes

[1] Nanda 2003.

[2] Sokal and Bricmont 1999.