

Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment

THE historiography of the 1979 revolution in Iran is shifting. After a generation of scholarship emphasizing elite manipulation through charismatic appeals to presumably static cultural norms, scholars from a diverse array of fields are increasingly interpreting the revolution from the bottom up—that is, as it was experienced, contingently, by everyday people. Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment at once theorizes and is itself emblematic of the shift. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, whose earlier work considered the unscripted course of post-revolutionary state consolidation, sounds its urgency, demonstrating the harmful interests served by renderings of the event as a ‘stolen revolution’ after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

He succinctly locates that rendering in Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson’s *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005)—a text that lambasts French philosopher Michel Foucault for a series of articles written about two visits to Iran in the late summer and early fall of 1978. Foucault celebrated the event. Afary and Anderson read his enthusiasm as a mistake produced by his distaste for universal principles. Ghamari-Tabrizi reads Afary and Anderson’s assessment of Foucault as an inaccurate and politically objectionable position, one that arises from a misreading of history commonly found among those who lost Iran’s post-revolutionary power struggle (Chapter 3). Afary and Anderson commit two sins: they presume a bifurcation between secularism and

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Islamism, and they imagine historical time in terms of teleological progression towards the realization of Euro-American liberal ideals. If we follow their lead, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, we risk misapprehending contemporary revolutionary events.

Why write a book about the historiography of the 1979 revolution through Foucault? For one, doing so is rhetorically effective. As the post-revolutionary violence unfolded, critics demanded that Foucault—the theorist most famously critical of confessional practices—confess his ‘mistake’ (p. 104). Where Afary and Anderson read Foucault’s later turn to ethics as his recantation (p. 168), Ghamari-Tabrizi neatly turns the tables. Foucault’s later writings were not a recantation, nor did they signal a break from his broader critique of liberal norms and universal history. Rather, they were shaped by his experiences in Iran—a continued

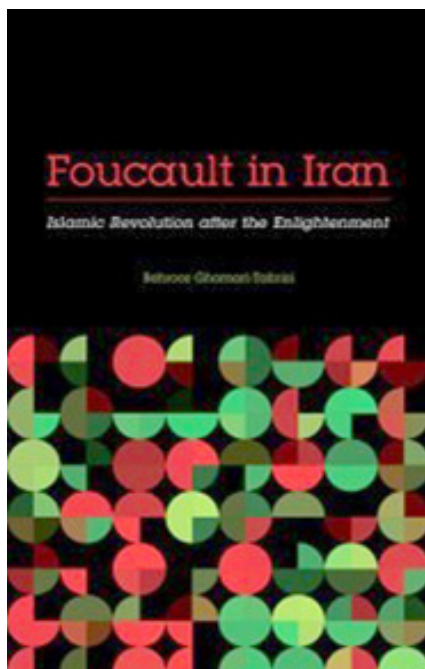
celebration of the revolution’s singularity without compromising his genealogical method. Instead of Foucault recanting, Ghamari-Tabrizi (once a ‘militant Marxist-Leninist student’) begins by confessing his previous short-sightedness (pp. xi–xii). In its effort ‘to introduce a new historiography’ (p. 7), the book’s stated goal, Foucault in Iran asks scholars of the revolution to recant their perspectival limitations as well.

Foucault in Iran is a brilliant and indispensable contribution. It succeeds as historical revision and conceptual provocation. Ghamari-Tabrizi shows how the bifurcation between secularism and Islamism held little traction for secular political actors in the heat of the revolution, only acquiring salience after the fact (pp. 82, 110, 120–121). In a similar vein, Chapter 4 presents second-wave feminist attempts to co-opt the March 1979 women’s protests in the name of global solidarity as out of sync with a nearly unanimous commitment to unity in the post-revolutionary period’s early months, even among the protestors themselves (pp. 151–152). As provocation, Foucault in Iran rightly draws our attention to the contingency that marked, in Foucault’s terms, ‘the manner in which [the revolution] was lived’. And it smartly inverts Susan Buck-Morss’ example in her essay ‘Hegel and Haiti’, calling for a historically grounded reading of Foucault’s later writings. It is perhaps less successful as a statement about what actually happened, or as a definitive analysis of Foucault’s political thought. The book’s preface calls for a historical account that resists the urge

to endorse perspectives produced by either side of the post-revolutionary power struggle—‘those who dominated the state and those who were purged and suppressed’ (p. xii). But Chapter 1 disproportionately relies on sources that tie the revolutionary movement to the post-revolutionary order. These very well may be the ‘realities’ of the event, ‘distorted’ by dissident scholars abroad (pp. 7–8). If so, the presentation of a definitive portrait belies the attempt to affirm the revolution’s indeterminacy. On some level, Ghamari-Tabrizi seems aware of this inconsistency, at times calling the event the ‘Iranian’ Revolution, the term favoured by proponents of the myth that the revolution was ‘stolen’, and at others the ‘Islamic’ Revolution, the term favoured by the post-revolutionary state.

While extensive commentary on Foucault rests beyond the book’s stated goal, Chapters 2 and 5 nevertheless argue that the revolution generated a ‘major shift in Foucault’s thinking’ (p. 176). The revolution is said to have led Foucault to imagine the ‘possibility of resistance’ apart from existing disciplinary formations (p. 68). Further substantiating this argument requires a wider consideration of Foucault’s later lectures—most notably, the discussion of ‘counter-conduct’ in his March 1978 lectures at the Collège de France before he travelled to Iran. And consistency: in nearly the same breath, Ghamari-Tabrizi presents Foucault as having seen in the revolution ‘an important affirmation of what he had already formulated many years earlier’ (p. 59) without clearly telling us how the two countervailing tendencies are reconciled.

Foucault in Iran’s shortcomings seem to result from the demands of revisionist history—that is, the need to present one’s understanding of a phenomenon as a point-for-point refutation



of other renderings. For instance, what does it mean to measure the ‘conceptual significance’ (p. xiii) of an event in terms of its impact on a European political thinker if its ‘conceptual significance’ is predicated on de-centring Europe in the interest of affirming singularity? To its credit, *Foucault in Iran* challenges Foucault’s misapprehension of the persistence of doctrinal Islam (pp. 73–74) as well as his presentation of the event as incommensurably ‘other’ (p. 62), showing how figures like

Ali Shari’ati (one of the revolution’s primary thinkers) emerged from transnational encounters (pp. 74, 88–90). But it does not directly theorize the event through Shari’ati. If Foucault teaches us to move beyond Europe (and, for that matter, Foucault), the book’s framework may hinder us from apprehending the event’s singularity on its own terms.

It is for future scholarship to continue the effort to do so. The question is, ironically, to what end? Is indeterminacy a desirable telos? This is not an easy question to answer, but it is a pressing one for social movements in our contemporary moment. In his response, Ghamari-Tabrizi equivocates. He refers to the ‘indeterminacy of human action’ as ‘beautiful’ (p. 173). Later, however, he registers the ‘unsettling and perilous’ status of ‘unknown possibilities’ (p. 192). His equivocation reflects our current predicament. And it gives further credence to the need to account for the political stakes of writing Iran’s revolutionary history when writing it—as *Foucault in Iran* tells us we should.

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