
Review

Foucault in Iran: Islamic revolution after the enlightenment

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In *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi displays an impressively meticulous reading of Michel Foucault's writings on the events that preceded the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy in early 1979. Ghamari-Tabrizi's main objective involves rescuing Foucault's ideas and responding to contemporary critiques, most specifically the one raised by Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson in their *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* published in 2005. The texts Foucault published in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* between 1978 and 1979 were relatively few, but the impact they had on the French and the larger Western intellectual sphere was significant, especially because it covered an ideologically charged subject in which the Iranian revolution came to represent a real test to the burgeoning genealogical project at the heart of French theory. In the heyday of postmodern theory and its dislocation of universalist discourses, the events unfolding in 1978–1979 provided food for thought for Foucault, partly because it was an opportunity for Western scholarship to test the extent to which their ideas applied to an unfolding social reality.

The main observation that got Foucault interested in the revolution, according to Ghamari-Tabrizi, was that the events did not fit the usual grid of analysis his contemporaries deployed, such as 'premodern/modern, secular/religious, reactionary/progressive, male/female, and subjugated/emancipated'. (p. 188). Foucault, according to Ghamari-Tabrizi, perceived the events leading to Khomeini's political takeover to be detached from the classifiable clutches of a universal 'Western teleological schema' (p. 9). In this sense, it did not matter if Foucault was right or wrong about the subsequent nature of the political regime that emerged in the aftermath of the revolution. Because what Foucault was mostly interested in was a reflection on 'the revolutionary moment', which involved 'a condition of possibilities, rather than an instance of the reaffirmation of the internal logic of a universal History' (p. 17).



One of the most laudable achievements of the book is keeping the analysis centred on the very act of revolution: on understanding the dynamics at the heart of the coming together of millions of people united in the effort to overthrow a political regime in place. Foucault's specific interest was to understand the nature of collective action. Therefore, as the French philosopher was not really concerned with the dynamics of consolidation of the Islamic regime and the consequences that followed Khomeini's ascendancy to power, most of the book focuses on the revolutionary act itself, even if Ghamari-Tabrizi shows no illusions about the former's political excesses. Ultimately, what really mattered for Foucault was the extent to which those popular mobilisations involved specific realisations, states of being, and social and political relations that did not fit a structurally inexorable March of history (and that could not be evaluated/judged through such a prism).

The different chapters of the book try to tackle various aspects of Foucault's critics' positions. First, one chapter assesses the fact that Foucault 'misread the revolution' because he had little knowledge in the Middle East or Islam. As a result, his enthusiasm for these events is believed to involve 'a simple infatuation' (p. 19), displaying orientalist undertones. Ghamari-Tabrizi shows well how Foucault was introduced to Shi'i Islam through the works of Louis Massignon and Henri Corbin, but more importantly, that none of his ideas regarding the revolution involved a specific endorsement of any doctrine pertaining to Islam (p. 63).

The second chapter assesses the assertion that the revolution was stolen by Khomeini from the left. Here Ghamari-Tabrizi tries to provide an alternative understanding of the unfolding of popular unrest, their intellectual precursors and the significance of Shi'i rituals in providing a 'tool-kit for action', to use Ann Swidler's expression (Swidler, 1986). One revealing point here is the extent to which the ideologically articulated boundaries of 'Left' and 'Islam' were much more blurred in this context than was portrayed retrospectively. The works of the Sorbonne-trained sociologist and philosopher Ali Shari'ati were instrumental in creating a common intellectual environment where different political categories collapsed into new ones. Moreover, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues quite persuasively that Khomeini was, from the very early days, the dominant figure through which discontent against the Shah was channelled, so much so that any leftist mobilisation and tactics were significantly indebted to Khomeini's spearheading the unrest.

Thirdly, the book questions the claim that the Islamists were clamping down on women's rights by looking at Iranian women's tense relation with a – mostly – western group of feminist intellectuals, such Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet. Most importantly, it shows how the *hejab* was misread as an instrument of oppression, when in fact its actual use in the formation of self and social action escaped the oppressed/liberated binary – a process captured by Foucault, who was adamant not to involve his own 'values' in his assessment of the unfolding of the revolution. In summary, as Ghamari-Tabrizi argues persuasively that critics of Foucault misread him, the author provides, throughout these chapters, a very



detailed account of Western mystifications of the popular unrests that took place during 1978–1979.

The main concept at the heart of Foucault's interest in the revolution – which led to sustained criticism over several years – was that of political spiritualism. According to Ghamari-Tabrizi, Foucault 'saw spirituality as a desire to liberate the *body* from the prison house of the *soul*' (p. 63). According to the author, Foucault insisted that this process was inherently political in the sense that this formation of the self was taking place in a social setting and was therefore profoundly relational. Thus, for Ghamari-Tabrizi, revolutions in the Foucauldian sense seem to be paradoxical moments when 'historical subjects refuse to subject themselves to History' (p. 63). Moreover, revolutions do not mark instances of the unfolding of a historical *telos*; rather they make history the subject of their actions.

In so doing Ghamari-Tabrizi does not just provide us with a more sophisticated reading of Foucault's ideas regarding the revolution; he also helps us understand the latter's intellectual trajectory throughout his later works. The dominant perspective is that, faced with an avalanche of critiques regarding his writings of the Iranian Revolution, Foucault slowly shifted his interests towards a more 'liberal', private or accommodating attitude towards enlightenment's project. In the last chapter of the book, we learn that there is no contradiction between this political concept of spirituality and the subsequent reflection on Kant's notion of enlightenment. Foucault's intellectual interest in *the care of self* – mostly influenced by the works of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot – does not just involve apolitical ethical practices; on the contrary, it engages people in acts of relationality that involve disciplinary and authoritative practices, as well as a shift from private to public. Thus, if we take seriously Foucault's thoughts on the Iranian revolution as a constitutive building block of his later work, it becomes clear that the philosopher's aim was to provide a non-Western, *contextualizable* understanding of enlightenment – here understood through Kant's 'dare to know' – as conducive to the formation of selves and community and seeking freedom from any type of tutelage.

While Ghamari-Tabrizi's reading of Foucault provides us with a stimulating understanding of the revolutionary – dislocating Kant's notion of enlightenment from its western historicity – it is still unclear how relevant this account is to social and political processes across time. As the author himself acknowledges, the political system that emerged following the revolution featured its own abuses, which may have contradicted the initial impulses of the revolution. In Ghamari-Tabrizi's terms, Foucault failed to see the 'network and ethos of legalistic and doctrinal Islam that would dominate post-revolution state policies' (pp. 73–74). I wonder, though, to what extent this development is part of a more predictable or at least *categorizable* understanding of history. Is there something about the nation-state and its capacity to control and manage resources, something about the capitalist economy, or modern institutions and practices that made this development maybe not inevitable, but at least understandable in a specific historical continuum?



In effect, what remains of this rupture in time? At least a succinct account of the aftermath of the revolution would have been warranted in order to understand that Foucault's vision of political spirituality was not some isolated event that just lasted two years. It remains to be seen whether the contemporary condition that is Iran – its politics, society and culture – escapes the categories of history that Marxists and other theorists have developed to understand the modern condition. In that sense, Foucault's later preoccupation with the working of the state and the various institutions and technologies of power surrounding it seem to be as important for understanding his intellectual legacy as his work on the care of the self. Ironically, Ghamari-Tabrizi does not factor Foucault's work on governmentality. This is understandable enough, given that the author is mostly concerned with the phenomenon of unrest and the formation of selves that occurred during such times. Above all, this is a fascinating read, one that definitely puts Foucault's ideas and the events of the Iranian revolution at the centre of the modern condition, *decolonizing* one of its founding myth, the enlightenment.

Reference

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