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Foucault: Against the Ideology of Enlightenment

Corey McCall

At various points throughout Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's excellent account of Foucault and the Iranian Revolution one finds a term not typically associated with Foucault, that of ideology. This term, much more at home in Marxist social analyses, would seem to be one that Foucault would want to avoid, given his ambivalence toward Marxism (and the Marxists' ambivalence toward his work).¹ Yet the term is not completely absent from Foucault's writings, and developing Ghamari-Tabrizi's use of the term in *Foucault in Iran* can help us to better understand both the role that ideology played in the Western response to the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath as well as Foucault's writings during this period. So, I hope to accomplish three things in my contribution to this symposium: explain what I mean by the term "ideology of Enlightenment"; analyze how ideology functions in various ways throughout *Foucault in Iran*; and, finally, consider how Foucault is writing against this particular ideology of Enlightenment in his Iranian writings as well as the conception of Enlightenment that Foucault develops in his late writings.

¹ Bill Martin provides a good survey of Foucault's ambivalence toward Marxism in his entry "Marxism" in the *Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, Leonard Lawlor and John Nale, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 288-294. Martin largely relies upon Foucault's interview with D. Trombadori conducted at the end of 1978 and published in the Italian journal *Il Contributo* in 1980, translated in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power*, James D. Faubion, ed. (New York: New Press, 1997), 239-297. As Martin notes, Foucault characterizes himself as a "Nietzschean communist," and he was motivated to join the French Communist Party due in part to his opposition to Hegel's thought (ibid., 249). Valuable recent studies of Foucault's relationship with Marxism include Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and Its Intensifications since 1984* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007) and Jacques Bidet, *Foucault With Marx* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

My reading of *Foucault in Iran* through the lens of Enlightenment ideology is motivated by the questions that motivated Ghamari-Tabrizi to write the book: “Is it possible for a people to envision and desire futures uncharted by already existing historical change and patterns of social change? Is it possible to think of dignity, humility, justice, and liberty outside Enlightenment cognitive maps and principles” (xii)?

I. The Ideology of Enlightenment

In Marxist thought, ideology designates a form of self-deception that manifests as false consciousness: a world-view that one cannot easily realize is completely delusional.² It’s more than just a matter of an individual’s various false beliefs, however. For example, in Marxist thought as it is developed by members of the Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, false consciousness characterizes one’s existence under both fascism and capitalism. Indeed, Adorno builds on the work of György Lukács as he seeks to demonstrate the profound continuities between the societies of fascist Germany and capitalist America and the various ideological constructs that characterize them.³ For the thinkers in this tradition, the key question was why the masses came to desire their own exploitation⁴

This should work as a rough definition of ideology, but we are faced with a difficulty when we consider that more specific notion of Enlightenment as an ideological concept: namely, that the Enlightenment itself can be conceived as an attempt to critique false consciousness, in particular those forms of religious false consciousness that were seen as particularly debilitating if one wanted to think for oneself. Indeed, the paradox of the European Enlightenment is that in their various efforts to critique religious false consciousness, thinkers such as Voltaire and Kant instituted a new form of ideology, that of the Enlightenment itself. I shall posit this claim as a way of making sense of what Foucault finds wanting in this Enlightenment as well as what he finds worth keeping in the Enlightenment *ethos* shorn of its ideological assumptions.

There are three relevant aspects that contribute to a definition of what I am calling the ideology of Enlightenment: (1) a pretension to universal, objective claims, (2) a teleological conception of history that typically manifests itself as historical progress, and (3) the positing of a clear distinction between the public and private spheres.

The first thing I want to note about this list is that it is not meant to be exhaustive: while I believe that these are necessary features of the Enlightenment ideology, they are not sufficient. Indeed, there are likely other features of this Enlightenment ideology, but these are the three features that I believe are most relevant for helping us to see more clearly what Foucault finds troubling about Enlightenment reason as well as the connections between

² Michael Rosen provides a good account of the history of the concept in *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). Rosen’s book traces the origins of ideology back to Plato and Augustine and through Marx to the Frankfurt School. More recently Jason Stanley has analyzed the contemporary significance of the term in his *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), see especially Chapter Five.

³ The two most relevant works here are of course Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1944]) and T.W. Adorno et. al, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950).

⁴ Rosen cites Wilhelm Reich, who poses the question this way in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*: “What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals for the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don’t* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don’t* strike” (Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude*, 1).

Foucault's writings on Iran and his later writings on the European Enlightenment. Second, the Enlightenment ideology differs from the Marxist conception of ideology in that it distorts the truth, but in a way that benefits those in power and the cultural elites. In Marxist terms, it is a bourgeois ideology that serves to justify the status quo for those in power so that they might remain in power, rather than a proletarian ideology that prevents the masses from seeing exploitative social relations for what they truly are.

Although it is a vague concept, one important aspect of the Enlightenment initially developed by Descartes and embraced by his successors is that a single method is necessary to discover truths of the same nature. A single method will yield universal truths that are all of the same kind. Consider, for example, Kant's canonical justification of universal epistemic grounds in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which any experience is fundamentally structured according to twelve basic categories of the understanding. Experience happens as a result of the mediation of these basic categories, and to be human is to experience the world accordingly. This provides the basis for Kant's account of experience that is universal and local variations fail to alter this basic account of experience. Kant certainly does not deny the existence of factors such as culture, gender, or race, but these differences either do not alter this basic epistemic framework or they disqualify women and ethnic minorities from full inclusion among the ranks of humanity.⁵

The Enlightenment conception of history is thoroughly teleological. This teleological conception of history becomes the basis for history understood as progress, which can be clearly seen in the thought of Kant and Hegel. Kant develops this teleological conception as a regulative ideal in his later writings, and becomes an organizing conception of Hegel's thought, with speculative history understood as reason progressively becoming aware of itself.⁶ The optimistic notion that things are getting better all the time underpins the ideology of Enlightenment as well as the notion of progress and development present in modern capitalism. Of course, it leads to a pernicious form of blindness, in which the proponents of progress fail to see those whom progress leaves behind.

Finally, the third relevant aspect: the distinction between the private and public spheres is an explicitly political conception that is fundamental to liberal political theory. As a result, it has informed the political theory of thinkers who work in this tradition, from precursors such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant to John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century and

⁵ Recently scholars have been paying more attention to the role of gender and racial difference in Kant's philosophical project and the Enlightenment more generally. See for example: Robin May Schott, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Kant* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997); Justin E.H. Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Peter K.J. Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon 1780-1830* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015).

⁶ For Kant, see "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," *Political Writings*, H.S. Reiss, ed., trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970 [1784]), 41-53. It is worth noting that this occasional piece was first published in *Die Berliner Monatschrift* on 11 November, just a month before Kant published the text which so fascinated Foucault during the final years of his life, *Die Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung*, which appeared on 12 December 1784. In his history essay, Kant postulates that the idea of progress is one that can be found at the general level of the species, but not at the individual level (42-43). Hegel takes up this idea in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977 [1807]). The question of universal history is taken up by Susan Buck-Morss in the short book that developed out of her 2000 *Critical Inquiry* article Ghamari-Tabrizi cites as an inspiration for his own book. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). Buck-Morss's book is comprised of a revised version of her article "Hegel and Haiti" in the first part and a second section entitled "Universal History" in which she attempts to justify her reliance on this concept in the face of critical resistance.

twentieth century thinkers who otherwise have very little in common such as John Rawls, Hannah Arendt, and Richard Rorty. Liberal thinkers clearly demarcate the private realm of individual beliefs and desires from the public sphere of economics and politics.⁷

Of course, there is much more that could be said regarding each of these aspects and how they undergird the ideology of Enlightenment, but I hope that this sketch suffices for discussion to follow. In the next section, I examine how these three components of Enlightenment ideology function in *Foucault in Iran* before turning briefly to consider Foucault's final writings as a critique of this ideology.

II. The Ideology of Enlightenment and the Iranian Revolution

Ghamari-Tabrizi accomplishes a number of laudable feats in *Foucault in Iran*, including a reconsideration of the Western response to the Iranian Revolution by contemporary observers, Foucault foremost among them. Michel Foucault's reports of the events of 1978-1979 provide the focus for his book, but Foucault's analyses are contrasted with the approach of feminists such as Kate Millett and, to a lesser extent, prominent French intellectuals who both critiqued Foucault's analyses and sought to make sense of the events themselves. Foucault's Iranian writings provide the basis for a reconsideration of the Revolution freed from the Enlightenment's ideological blinders and a reconsideration of the significance of these writings in the context of Foucault's later writings.

From the beginning, the events that led to the Iranian Revolution were seen as unthinkable from the standpoint of Western Enlightened reason. Because the Shah was seen as a modernizer who was rationalizing Iranian society, the unrest that would eventually lead to the Iranian Revolution was largely dismissed by Western observers as isolated and ineffective (35). Western interpreters, including Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, claim that anti-modernist Shi'ite clerics hijacked what was initially a textbook Marxist revolt against the self-proclaimed modernizer of Iran. Foucault himself was duped by these traditionalists because he was already fascinated by anti-modern currents of European thought. According to this narrative, what had initially been a modern revolution against a despotic leader was subsequently thwarted by anti-modernists, and Foucault, who was himself an anti-modernist, failed to see this. The problem is that this story fails to do justice to the complexity of the Iranian Revolution at the same time it fundamentally misreads Foucault.

These basic misunderstandings are due at least in part to the framework imposed on these events and on Foucault's writings by Enlightenment ideology. Recall that Enlightenment thinkers understood themselves as performing a critique of particular religious superstition and unreason in the name of universal reason. Consequently, the revolutionary movement in Iran either had to be seen as consistent with this critique or opposed to it. Adherents to this false dichotomy had to choose between understanding revolutionary Iran as a rational revolution in the name of universal human rights and basic human dignity on the one hand or in terms of reactionary forms of traditionalism and tribalism that would ultimately fail to advance these aims on the other. This dichotomy made

⁷ It should be noted that Kant understands this distinction differently than later classical liberals such as Mill. For Kant, the private use of reason is reason constrained by one's social role as a member of officialdom, while the public use of reason is unconstrained and free, which Kant elaborates in the "What is Enlightenment?" essay. I shall return to this Kantian distinction in the final section of this essay. For an overview and defense of political liberalism, see Charles Larmore, "Political Liberalism," in *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 121-151.

it impossible for Western observers to understand how Marxists could align themselves with Shi'ites with the goal of ending the Shah's reign. Furthermore, it led Afary and Anderson to conclude that the Marxist revolution had been hijacked by extremist forces led by Khomeini. Finally, it made it impossible to see Ayatollah Khomeini and the members of the Iranian revolutionary government as anything other than extremists who support terror, a misconception that dogs relations between the United States and Iran to this day.

At least implicitly, this distinction between the rational aims of revolution and the irrational aims of religion assumes a teleological conception of history. Ghamari-Tabrizi rightly points out that Foucault rejected all forms of history that presupposed a developmental aim or telos. This includes Marxist teleological historical conceptions as well as Whiggish conceptions of history that continue to prevail among cheerleaders for Western-style democracy that have not only damaged U.S.-Iranian relations since the Revolution but have also determined the U.S. geopolitical stance in the broader region of the Middle East beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. Both the Marxist conception of history and U.S. triumphalism can trace their roots back to Enlightenment forms of historiography that view history as an inevitable march of progress.

As Edward Said points out, most influentially in *Orientalism*, once the West conceives itself as comprised of peoples with history, then the Middle East becomes little more than the backdrop upon which this Western history unfolds. Orientalism is the scholarly and political attempt to constitute the peoples of Asia and the Middle East as peoples without history, or, better, peoples whose history only makes sense within the context of the sweep of Western history (Said characterizes it an "an appendage" of the West in *Orientalism*).⁸ Islam is conceived as an oppressive ideology that remains ever the same. Ghamari-Tabrizi cites the Moroccan historian and early critic of Orientalism Abdallah Laroui, who wrote in 1976 that "[t]here are no differences between classical Islam and medieval Islam or simply Islam. There is, then, only one Islam: an Islam that mutates within itself when a tradition takes shape on the basis of a reconstructed 'classical' period. From that time onward the actual succession of facts becomes illusory; examples can be drawn from any period or source whatever" (115).⁹ Islam becomes immune to historical change, at best variations on a theme that had already been established in the seventh century. This essentialized conception of Islam, with its practitioners trapped in the amber of tradition, becomes the basis for Orientalist conceptions that contrast with the teleological conception of historical development that is one of the defining aspects of Enlightenment ideology. The Orient exists for the Enlightenment, insofar as it exists at all, as a religion frozen in time.

The third relevant aspect of the Enlightenment ideology I sketched in the first section is the distinction between the public and private realms. This distinction is most clearly seen in the Western feminist response to the Iranian Revolution, which is the subject of the fourth chapter of *Foucault in Iran*. Many Western feminists were quick to decry the revolution, for they saw it as the imposition of Islamic norms that were both irrational and misogynistic. This claim derives from an Enlightenment assumption that incorporates both of the aspects that were discussed previously: it assumes that Islam remains essentially the same, and that

⁸ In *Orientalism* Said demonstrates how various discursive projects for understanding the Orient were marshaled to control the Middle East and Asia by Western imperial powers beginning in the eighteenth century. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). The phrase "people without history" is borrowed from anthropologist Eric R. Wolf's historical analysis of imperial capitalism in *Europe and the People Without History*, 2nd Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

⁹ The passage cited is from *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 60.

Islam and feminism are fundamentally incompatible. Additionally, it assumes that Western women must assume the burden of “saving brown women from brown men” (138).¹⁰ This can be most clearly seen in Kate Millett’s misadventures in Iran during the spring of 1979. Millett’s condescending assumption that she acted on behalf of all women when she wrote about her experience understandably alienated many in the Iranian women’s movement, who saw the revolution as about something much more significant than the symbolic politics centering on the *hijab* and whether it should be worn in public. Western feminists, including Millett, seized on this issue because they saw women’s issues solely through the lens of modernity versus tradition, while Foucault paid attention to the events, without trying to impose an *a priori* ideological framework upon them in order to better comprehend them from his own perspective, an effort which ironically leads to more miscomprehension than anything else.

Second-Wave Feminists such as Millett focus on the public-private distinction, and they hold that the key goals of feminism were “autonomy and liberation” (156). These goals assume the distinction between the public realm of politics and economics and the private realm of the home. “Second Wave Feminist theory was primarily based on a common distinction between the public and private spheres” (156). They generalized from the experience of white, middle-class women in advanced Western democracies in formulating a feminism that would fight against patriarchy in the public sphere of employment and political rights as well as in the private sphere, concerning such issues as reproductive rights and educational opportunities. This focus neglected the concerns of many and universalized the struggle in a way that many women found unhelpful.

In the final section, I shall turn finally to Foucault in order to see whether it is helpful to understand his writings from the late 1970s onward as an attempt to understand the Enlightenment in ways that would free us from the constraints of its ideology.

III. Foucault, Iran, and the Ideology of Enlightenment

In his 1979 essay, “For an Ethic of Discomfort,” Foucault takes up what will become a familiar topic during his final years, that of the Enlightenment. He notes, rightly, that by the time Kant posed the question in 1784, the question itself had already become old hat. Posing the question of Enlightenment was no longer novel, and answers to Kant’s question proliferated. Nevertheless the question remained urgent, and it was fueled by the attempt to figure out who we are because of what is happening today. The journalist’s question had taken on a philosophical urgency. In a passage that Ghamari-Tabrizi cites, Foucault raises the issue of ideology in connection with the Enlightenment (162):

Everyone has their own way of changing, or, what amounts to the same thing, of perceiving that everything changes. In this matter, nothing is more arrogant than to try to dictate to others. My way of being no longer the same is, by definition, the most singular part of what I am. Yet God knows that there are ideological traffic police around, and we can hear their whistles blast: go left, go right, here, later, get moving, not know... The insistence on

¹⁰ Ghamari-Tabrizi cites Gayatri Spivak’s influential article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” here.

identity and the injunction to make a break both feel like impositions, and in the same way.¹¹

The relevance of this passage for Foucault's Iranian writings could not be clearer: Foucault's attempt to understand events in Iran was from the standpoint of an observer, as a philosophical journalist rather than an ideologue whose aim would be to understand how the Iranian Revolution fits into a pre-ordained historical framework. Rather than attempting to understand the essential meaning of the Iranian Revolution, Foucault wanted to grasp its singularity: as an experience whose meaning remains open. Foucault writes against this ideology of the Enlightenment by attempting to experience the singularity of events without fixing their significance beforehand (as Western feminists and others sought to do) or after the fact (as Foucault's critics often sought to do).

In the final chapter of *Foucault in Iran*, Ghamari-Tabrizi reassesses the significance of Foucault's Iranian writings. Foucault's Iranian writings have long been seen as, if not an embarrassment, a project distinct from the concerns of his final period. Some interpreters have gone so far as to claim that Foucault renounces his earlier writings in favor of a liberal (or even neo-liberal) form of individualism that assumes a strong distinction between the public and private realms, similar in many respects to the political philosophy of the American philosopher Richard Rorty (Ghamari-Tabrizi cites Afary and Anderson as well as Eric Paras as examples). According to this account, Foucault's turn toward the aesthetics of existence signals Foucault's transformation from postmodern *enfant terrible* to liberal. However, if we take Foucault's Iranian writings seriously, then this position becomes untenable. *Foucault in Iran* makes the case for this by focusing on Foucault's conception of *parrhesia*.

Foucault discovers *parrhesia*, the practice of frank or courageous speech that becomes so central to his final writings, in the streets of Tehran. *Parrhesia* reveals those inconvenient truths that the powerful wish to conceal. These courageous individuals stand up to the tyrant in the name of the truth, and it is these acts of truth-telling that became the basis for the mass movement of the revolution. The individual's practices of the self can become revolutionary: this was one of the key lessons that Foucault learned in Iran.

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¹¹ "For an Ethic of Discomfort," in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power*, 444. It is worth noting that this short text is a review of Jean Daniel's book *L'ère des ruptures*. Daniel (1920-) is a French-Jewish journalist who was born in Algeria whose life parallels that of Albert Camus in many ways (indeed, they were friends). Daniel's book is a journalist's account of his life on the Left in the tumultuous years of the 1960s and 1970s.

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