

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

March 21, 2017

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 272 pp., \$27.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780816699490.

Foucault and Iran

Banu Bargu

In his remarkable book, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi presents an important analysis of Michel Foucault's journalistic writings penned for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* during 1978-79. The book's defining gesture is to highlight the neglected role of Foucault's experience in Iran. This gesture is similar to and takes inspiration from that of Susan-Buck Morss in her deservedly famous essay "Hegel and Haiti."¹ It will be recalled that, in that essay, Buck-Morss makes a compelling case for reading Hegel's famous dialectic of lordship and bondage in relation to the historical context in which his *Phenomenology* was composed. This context was defined by the first successful slave revolt in history. If Hegel did not travel to Santo Domingo to witness the enormity of this revolution firsthand, it is nevertheless impossible for its news, featured extensively in the journal *Minerva*, among many other newspapers, Buck-Morss contends, to have escaped him. The revolutionary struggle in the Caribbean deeply and concretely permeated Hegel's philosophy, just as the revolutionary struggle in Iran made a deep impact on Foucault, who actually traveled to Iran to witness the events and sent his dispatches back to his readers in Europe. Buck-Morss's important intervention challenged Hegel scholarship revealing its glaring failure to interrogate the connection between Hegel and Haiti. The problem of Foucault and Iran, on the other hand, is not the complete omission of their intimate connection within Foucault scholarship but, rather, the relative neglect and, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, even misinterpretation of its significance and implications.

¹ Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (2000): 821-865.

Dominant scholarship on Foucault often tends to overlook his interest in Iran, considering it an insignificant and isolated episode that has had little bearing on his thought. Among those who do take notice of Foucault's work on Iran, on the other hand, the general tendency is to criticize it for its alleged endorsement of theocracy, when it is not to dismiss it outright as an embarrassing lapse of political judgment. Ghamari-Tabrizi's careful and multifaceted reconstruction of Foucault's writings on Iran offers a necessary corrective to the interpretations that marginalize or devalue the significance of Foucault's experience in Iran. By providing a nuanced account of Foucault's direct encounter with the revolutionary movement in Iran and the reflections that resulted from that encounter, *Foucault in Iran* restores the specificity and registers the significance of this experience in Foucault's prolific oeuvre, carefully considering its philosophical, ethical, and political ramifications. It not only makes a strong case for the impact of this experience on Foucault's later writings on the self-constitution of subjectivity and *parrhesia*, it also offers a passionate and cogently argued rebuttal to those scholars who condemn Foucault for his favorable account of the revolutionary movement in Iran, by carefully demonstrating the problems and flaws in their arguments, unpacking the implicit presuppositions that guide them, and offering convincing arguments against their criticisms.

However, it would be a mistake to consider *Foucault in Iran* simply a book about Foucault. At the same time, it is a significant intervention about how to understand the Iranian revolution. The target of Ghamari-Tabrizi's intervention is Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson's 2005 book *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*.² In the appendix of this book, Afary and Anderson provide a compilation of annotated English translations of Foucault's articles on Iran, along with the interventions of his critics and Foucault's responses. They frame these writings with an extended introduction in which the authors take Foucault to task for his assessment of the Iranian revolution. Criticizing Foucault, they argue that he was seduced by the "political spirituality" that fascinated him in the movement of the masses, which in turn blinded him to the totalitarian core of Islamism and led him to legitimize the theocratic regime. This was possible, they argue, due to many failings on part of Foucault's theoretical endeavor, among which they include his Orientalist approach to and appreciation of the non-West, his anti-modernism, his post-structuralist critique of humanism and emancipatory politics alike, his "disdain" for liberal constitutionalism, his admiration for sacrifice, blindness to gender, and fascination with non-Western forms of homosexuality. Some, if not all, of the criticisms in this extensive catalogue of Foucault's faults and weaknesses rest on affinities and resonances between these tenets of Foucault's thought and his imputed embrace of Islamism rather than a compelling demonstration of direct and obvious connections.³ Through these criticisms, Afary and Anderson indict what they consider to be a particular blend of "Nietzschean-Heideggerian discourse," a discourse they perceive as dangerously affirming a religious fanaticism that reaches beyond the Iranian revolution to the militant movements that have impacted the political conjuncture most forcefully since September 11.

In fact, Ghamari-Tabrizi's book is best characterized as a sustained and elaborate response to Afary and Anderson's account of both Foucault's interpretation of the Iranian revolution, and through that interpretation, the Iranian revolution itself. The book opposes

² Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³ For a similar criticism, also see Bonnie Honig, "What Foucault Saw at the Revolution: On the Use and Abuse of Theology for Politics," *Political Theory* 36, no. 2 (2008): 301-312.

Afary and Anderson's hostile portrait of Foucault by providing an alternative history of the revolutionary movement in Iran that lends support to Foucault's insights, on the one hand, while it dissects the teleological, secularist, and accusatory underpinnings of their arguments, on the other. Ghamari-Tabrizi argues against what he detects to be a denigration of the religious masses in the name of Enlightenment ideals, where secularism represents an unquestionably more enlightened, advanced, and progressive politics. Against the claim for a purported conversion in Foucault that involves a return to the Enlightenment, as evidenced according to Afary and Anderson by Foucault's positive assessment of Kant in the wake of his experience in Iran and his ex post realization of the dangers of theocratic government, Ghamari-Tabrizi's book makes a strong case for the continuity of Foucault's position with respect to political spirituality. It does so by complicating Foucault's relationship to Kant and demonstrating the impact of Foucault's observations in Iran upon his later writings on subjectivity, especially by way of the elaboration of the link between the transformation of the self and social transformation in Foucault's last few years. *Foucault in Iran* thus presents a two-pronged response to his secularist critics that is at once historiographical and theoretical.

More specifically, through a reconstruction of the major events leading up to the revolution, including the author's own recollections of that time, the book offers a reading of the Iranian revolution that takes distance from a philosophy of history. Rejecting a teleological view of the revolution that takes its End as predetermined and already constitutively inscribed in its trajectory at its Origin, Ghamari-Tabrizi uncouples the significant demonstrations and events that created the revolutionary mobilization from the aftermath of the revolution marked by the consolidation of an authoritarian theocracy. Rejecting a deterministic logic in the writing of history, he debunks the view that the ensuing regime was an "inevitable outcome" of the events leading up to the revolution and the character of the mass movement that comprised it. Instead, he advocates an alternative historiography that emphasizes contingency, indeterminacy, and multiple possibilities. For Ghamari-Tabrizi, the predominant characteristics of the ensuing regime should be sought in the post-revolutionary power struggles rather than in the religious idiom with which the Iranian masses expressed their discontent with the Shah's regime. One of the main reasons why he finds Foucault's account of the Iranian revolution promising is precisely because Foucault, too, rejects a teleology and instead of deducing the significance of the events retrospectively from their overall outcome, greets the revolution as a watershed moment of a people determining its destiny, regardless of that revolution's ultimate political and social consequences. Ghamari-Tabrizi thus affirms Foucault's position that rejects the equivalence between Islamism and Islamic theocracy, criticizing Afary and Anderson's attempt to conflate the two as hostage to an implicit teleology that considers the theocracy as the unavoidable consequence of Islamism.

At the same time, Ghamari-Tabrizi's historiographic intervention forwards a more complex and subtle view of the revolutionary process, one that rejects the conventional approach to subsume it in "foundational binaries," binaries that divide the forces active in the mass mobilizations according to secular vs. religious groups, considering the former to be progressive and the latter reactionary. Afary and Anderson's account is one of these attempts, according to the author. Giving an alternative account of the forces on the ground, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues instead that the question of secularism was not the main dividing line among revolutionary organizations. Indeed, he purports, there was a lot of transitivity among Marxist and Shi'ite militancy, as exemplified by the sermons of Ali Shari'ati and the trajectory of the Mojahedeen. The author accordingly situates Shari'ati as a thinker who blended traditions—a spiritual reading of Islam with socialist and anticolonialist ideas,

thereby advancing a unique and indigenous form of liberation theology. According to Ghamari-Tabrizi, secularism really became a determining feature of splits *after* the revolution, in which religious factions monopolized power at the expense of other groups. By contrast, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, if one were to look at the mass mobilizations leading up to the revolution from the alternative perspective of those supporting the revolution vs. those defending the Shah's regime, one would have to group religious Khomeini supporters and Marxist groups together instead of opposed to one another on the basis of a religious vs. secular divide. According to his view, the revolutionary forces were either sympathetic or at least not hostile to the religious idiom in which mass protests found expression, while the "secularists" were predominantly the defenders of the monarchy. In this light, Ghamari-Tabrizi appreciates Foucault's interpretation, which he considers to reject a simplistic reading of the revolution based on a religious vs. secular divide, recognizing instead the centrality of Shi'ite rituals and traditions as a unifying and mobilizing force against the Shah's regime. However, Ghamari-Tabrizi's interpretation also goes beyond complicating the simplified readings of critics like Afary and Anderson, by providing a different picture of the alignment of social forces prior to the revolution than the secular vs. religious binary would allow, which enables him to cast a different light on Foucault. Through a reconstruction of events that is deeply imbued by his own political sympathies, especially toward Khomeini as the leader of the revolution and at times against the leftist revolutionaries whose violent actions are portrayed as the events that precipitated the postrevolutionary repression, he gives a forceful revisionist reading of the revolution that might also be vulnerable to criticism for its selectivity, especially from the left (though not for the reasons advanced by Afary and Anderson). Ghamari-Tabrizi's account does tend to underplay the reasons distinct from the actions of the leftist opposition, especially the ideological and political reasons internal to Khomeini's revolutionary government, that led to the wielders of power in the nascent regime to repress and eliminate opposition altogether. Despite this, Ghamari-Tabrizi remains judiciously firm against justifying the indiscriminate mass violence and repression in the postrevolutionary period. The problems that arise from his historical counter-narrative should not dilute the fact that he is absolutely right to critique the attribution of a universal and inevitable "fascist" core to Islamic politics, a position represented by Afary and Anderson's narrative.

Two core issues crystallize the disagreement between Afary and Anderson's account, on the one hand, and Ghamari-Tabrizi's, on the other. The first is the issue of political spirituality. For Afary and Anderson, Foucault's embrace of political spirituality is a dangerous turn that, combined with his romantic anti-modernism, aligns him with religious fundamentalism. By contrast, for Ghamari-Tabrizi, not only is Afary and Anderson's view a reflection of a philosophy of history that judges progress according to secularization and discredits spirituality as traditionalist, archaic, and backward, but Foucault's embrace of spirituality is precisely a way of acknowledging the transformative potentialities that emanate from within religion. While he acknowledges that theocracy might be one of these consequences, Ghamari-Tabrizi is more willing to consider that this outcome does not exhaust all possible forms that religious traditions can inform. Instead, like Foucault, he values spirituality as a political resource that links the transformation of the self to social and political transformation. Where Afary and Anderson only see bigotry and repression, especially against foreigners, women, and homosexuals, Ghamari-Tabrizi sees the expression of the people's desire for a more egalitarian, anti-imperialist, and popular-democratic form of government.

The second contentious issue centers on gender politics. Where Afary and Anderson criticize Foucault for failing to take notice of women's struggles against the imposition of the *hijab*, Ghamari-Tabrizi sees a more complicated picture where the *hijab* also allowed opportunities for pious women to participate in public life and experience social mobility. While Afary and Anderson consider the compulsory *hijab* mainly as the curtailment of women's freedom, Ghamari-Tabrizi underscores cultural difference to which Afary and Anderson's universalist view of women's emancipation is inattentive. Further, he detects in their discourse the markers of a white/European "civilizing mission," drawing a parallel between their position and that of the hastily planned and generally counter-productive solidarity visits of North American and European feminists, such as Kate Millett, to Iran in the early aftermath of the revolution. Taking Millett's account of her experience in Iran as symptomatic of a certain patronizing feminist discourse that exemplifies Western women seeking to "save" their Iranian "sisters," a position that he also attributes to Afary and Anderson, Ghamari-Tabrizi reconstructs the struggle of women in the aftermath of the revolution in a different light. In his narrative, women appear more supportive of Khomeini and critical of Western feminists' attempts to instrumentalize their demands (and turn them into anti-Khomeini protests) without a full understanding of the context. While not denying the existence of gender oppression in the imposition of the *hijab*, Ghamari-Tabrizi once again provides a more complicated picture that does not fit squarely within a binary view of the revolution divided between religious reactionaries and secularist progressives.

However, while Ghamari-Tabrizi's detailed analysis of the international solidarity campaigns of Western feminists and their ambivalent local resonance clearly reveals a disjuncture between different understandings of what constitutes feminism and women's emancipation, especially with respect to the role of the *hijab* and other religious rituals, his position does not necessarily invalidate the feminist criticism of Foucault, namely, that he was inattentive to the gender dynamics of the revolution and its aftermath. While it can be conceded that Foucault was much more open to the possibilities germane to different gender experiences within Islamic politics than Afary and Anderson would be willing to accept, it is difficult to read the full spectrum of Ghamari-Tabrizi's position back into Foucault's reflections. Even as Ghamari-Tabrizi's criticism of Afary and Anderson's categorical equation of the *hijab* with gender oppression is important, this response seems to be less about Foucault's own views about gender experience in the Iranian revolution than revelatory of the author's own sympathies.

Furthermore, it seems to me that while Ghamari-Tabrizi rightly defends Foucault against the secularist dismissal of his reflections, he does so somewhat at the expense of a satiating critical engagement with Foucault's account. For example, in his effort to salvage Foucault, the author is too quick to endorse the unity he attributed to the revolutionary mobilizations that ensued from political spirituality. While the author acknowledges that Foucault did not pay enough attention to the internal divisions and factions in the revolutionary movement, his main interest is in arguing against Afary and Anderson's criticism of Foucault's Orientalism (for them, Foucault's view of the revolution as a unitary whole is a sign of his Orientalism) rather than tracing the implications of Foucault's neglect of class, gender, and ethnicity as differentiated and differentiating experiences within the revolution. Foucault's espousal of unity and omission of differences within that unity are significant, in my opinion, especially given the difference this view presents with respect to Foucault's former pronouncements about the local, disparate, and heterogeneous character of instances of resistance. This difference begs to be theorized more explicitly.

Relatedly, the question of Orientalism lurks in the background as an unresolved tension. On the one hand, it is clear that Ghamari-Tabrizi wants to debunk the simplistic attribution of Orientalism to Foucault, particularly on the basis of his glorification of the revolutionary nature of the mass movement and its putative unity. He seems to move in this direction insofar as he emphasizes Foucault's divergence from a textual hermeneutics that is characteristic of Orientalism. On the other hand, the author himself also detects elements of Orientalism in Foucault, especially in the way he tends to paint a stark contrast between Iran and the West, pitting, respectively, political spirituality against its forgetting, revolutionary mobilization against a political impasse, revolt and authenticity against domination and docility, and unity against fragmentation in the East and the West. Given these juxtapositions, I wonder whether it would not be possible to consider Foucault to be more of an anti-Occidentalism than an Orientalist? Ultimately, the question of Orientalism remains open and the author's oscillation on this issue indicates the need for further exploration.

These criticisms, however, in no way detract from the value of this excellent book, which sheds much needed light on the Iran writings of Foucault and how to interpret them. For Ghamari-Tabrizi, who affirms and indeed reiterates Foucault's romantic account of the Iranian revolution, Foucault's appreciation of the "irreducibility" of the "man [sic] in revolt" attests to the "beautiful indeterminacy of human action" that exceeds any script dictated by a teleology in history. That this revolt has drawn its spiritual resources from a radicalized form of Shi'ite Islam that emphasized sacrifice in no way diminishes its value, Ghamari-Tabrizi tells us, as Foucault's critics searching for a revolution according to a progressivist schema readily contend. Instead, Ghamari-Tabrizi provocatively argues, this spirituality is all the more important both to achieve a unified will and to carry out the work of self-transformation necessary for achieving revolutionary transformation. The work of spiritual transformation has no guarantees and its mass expression can very well lead to the consolidation of an absolutist, oppressive regime in the name of the same masses. However, this does not exhaust other possible trajectories that might pave the way toward something better.⁴

Banu Bargu
Associate Professor of Politics
New School for Social Research

⁴ The author would like to thank Sara Hassani and Lucian Stone for their insightful comments and suggestions.

© 2017: Banu Bargu

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Bargu, Banu, *Foucault and Iran*, *SCTIW Review Book Symposium on Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's Foucault in Iran*, *SCTIW Review*, March 21, 2017. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1403>.

ISSN: 2374-9288