

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

March 23, 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.

Rescuing the Revolution from Its Outcome

Anthony C. Alessandrini

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* is an exemplary book in a number of ways, but perhaps first and foremost because of what the book does *not* do. While it represents the most extensive and sympathetic consideration in English of Michel Foucault's writings on the events leading up to and culminating in the Iranian Revolution, Ghamari-Tabrizi does not fall into the commonplace critical practice of arguing whether Foucault was "right" or "wrong" about the revolution and its aftermath. More admirably, *Foucault in Iran* is not satisfied with performing the subtler but still ultimately familiar work of simply asking what Foucault's writings on Iran can do for us in analyzing our contemporary context. Instead, the book performs Ghamari-Tabrizi's scrupulous allegiance to what he finds most valuable in Foucault's work: his insistence upon recognizing "the singularity of the revolution" and the concomitant need "to liberate it from the constraints of universalist narratives" (75). By doing so, he manages to contribute not only a new and significant understanding of Foucault's late work on ethics, but also an important re-historicizing of the Iranian Revolution for an audience that very likely needs this re-telling. It is on this notion of singularity as Ghamari-Tabrizi reads it out of Foucault's work, as well as out of the revolution itself, that I will thus focus on in my contribution to this roundtable.

What is immediately striking in this regard is Ghamari-Tabrizi's refusal to speak from an "insider" perspective as one intimately involved in making the revolution, as well as one who suffered immeasurably from the manner in which, as he puts it, "the *realpolitik* of the postrevolutionary state...colonized the spiritual novelty of the revolt" (189). This is particularly striking for readers

of Ghamari-Tabrizi's memoir, *Remembering Akbar: Inside the Iranian Revolution*, published at approximately the same time as *Foucault in Iran*.¹ It is tempting to describe *Remembering Akbar* as a companion work to *Foucault in Iran*, but to do so would be to ignore the singular accomplishments of each. Suffice it to say that even the least sympathetic reader would be hard pressed to blame Ghamari-Tabrizi had he chosen to speak from the realm of personal experience in his reconsideration of the Iranian Revolution, especially in addressing what he calls the two key myths in the accepted narrative of the revolution: first, "the myth of the stolen revolution," by which we are told that the clergy hijacked the revolution and seized leadership at the expense of the "secular" elements of the left (19); second, the related assertion that the "reign of terror" that followed the revolution "was the *inevitable* result and the *natural* progression of Islamism" (191, emphases in original). By the end of the book, Ghamari-Tabrizi has convincingly undone both of these myths, but he does so, quite remarkably, without reference to his own personal experience of the reign of terror "as a Marxist-Leninist student who organized rallies, wrote pamphlets, recruited other students to the *cause*, and fought daily battles on the streets of Tehran during the ghastly period of martial law" (xi, emphasis in original)—and who, as readers of *Remembering Akbar* will know, suffered imprisonment and torture during the subsequent reign of terror.

Indeed, Ghamari-Tabrizi begins the book by suggesting that Foucault's writings on Iran, which he first encountered in Persian translation, have been valuable to him precisely as a way to challenge the way his own experience of the revolution threatened his ability to analyze it, leading him to articulate the question of "whether I should regard my own participatory and eyewitness accounts as a form of privileged knowledge or, in contrast, a distortion of reality" (xii). In a larger sense, he finds in Foucault's writings on the revolution "a perfect window through which one could look at revolutionary events in Iran outside the discursive frames that make revolution legible" (xiii); this latter point becomes the key to helping Ghamari-Tabrizi convincingly undo the myths that have determined the commonplace narrative of the revolution. He concludes the book by drawing a surprising parallel to Susan Buck-Morss's work on Hegel and Haiti, which works to return Hegel from the realm of the abstract to the specific political milieu of his time, more specifically, the slave rebellion in Santo Domingo (187-188).² It is this same sort of dialectical move that allows Ghamari-Tabrizi's book to simultaneously use Foucault's work to help redescribe the events of the Iranian Revolution and to also provide us with a different and much more historically grounded reading of Foucault's late work.

In between this beginning and this conclusion, Ghamari-Tabrizi—who had already shown himself to be a formidable analyst of modern Iran in his previous book *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran*³—also shows himself to be a careful and often brilliant reader of Foucault's work. He prepares the ground with an opening chapter, "Thinking the Unthinkable: The Revolutionary Movement in Iran," that provides, especially for readers unfamiliar with the revolutionary movement in Iran, both a basic history and also an inspired re-telling of this history. He focuses upon "the constitutive significance of Shi'ism, both as a feature of the popular cultural endowment and as a liberation theology" in the revolutionary movement of 1978-79 (20), and argues, among other points, that Shi'ism provided an idiom

¹ Behrooz Ghamari, *Remembering Akbar: Inside the Iranian Revolution* (New York: OR Books, 2016).

² Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (2000): 821-865; subsequently expanded and published as *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

³ Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics, and Democratic Reform* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

through which the revolutionary movement as a whole could be articulated, even for Marxists and other members of the left. This point will become central to his re-reading of Foucault's own emphasis on what he refers to as "political spirituality" in the Iranian Revolution, which has been the major point of contention for both admirers and critics of Foucault's writings on Iran.

In the title of the book's second chapter, Ghamari-Tabrizi announces his intention to avoid the all-too-common practice of declaring Foucault to be either "right" or "wrong" about the revolution (with most of his readers coming down on the side of "he was wrong!") by asking instead: "How Did Foucault Make Sense of the Iranian Revolution?" He does not claim that Foucault had anything like the necessary expertise to provide an exhaustive analysis of the revolution, nor does he absolve him of his blind spots—indeed, he ends the chapter by comparing Foucault's writings on Iran to Frantz Fanon's *L'an V de la révolution algérienne*,⁴ arguing that while both wrote from a place of deep sympathy and solidarity, both writers also displayed "their limited knowledge of the society that has given rise to the emancipatory struggle on which they both comment," which in turn means that they both downplay the way that "the same magnanimous revolutionary energy could then revert into fueling a repressive state machine" (72-73). But what Foucault did recognize, according to Ghamari-Tabrizi, is that religion was what "link[ed] the revolutionary movement directly to a people's general sense of their place in the world." Foucault's conclusion thus echoes what Ghamari-Tabrizi's archival research in the previous chapter had also suggested: "Religion afforded the revolution a vocabulary...through which a people could redefine its existence" (64). This, then, is Foucault's key insight about the revolution, which will then go on to resonate throughout the remainder of his late writing: "*religion constituted a force that perpetuated the hermeneutics of the subject on the streets of revolutionary Iran*" (65, emphasis in original).

This is precisely the point that has been most misunderstood by Foucault's critics, as well as by many in the West for whom a traditional liberal understanding of the necessary "progress" by which revolutions must proceed makes the Iranian Revolution appear to be a disaster whose postrevolutionary outcome could be foretold by its "Islamist" character. Ghamari-Tabrizi's main target in Chapter 3 is Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson's deeply-flawed but nevertheless influential book *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*.⁵ To Ghamari-Tabrizi's credit, he avoids simply enumerating Afary and Anderson's many misreadings, decontextualizations, and blatant mischaracterizations of Foucault's work.⁶ Instead, he maintains his larger focus upon recognizing and insisting upon "the singularity of the revolution" by "liberat[ing] it from the constraints of universalist narratives" of the sorts actively upheld by Afary and Anderson. The larger goal—carried out admirably not only via a close reading of Afary and Anderson but also through skillful archival work and political analysis—is to "save the integrity of the revolutionary movement from its later outcomes" (75). This is in keeping with Foucault's insistence, as Ghamari-Tabrizi puts it, that "the manner in which the revolution was lived must remain distinct from its success or failure"

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* (Paris: François Maspero, 1959), translated as *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove, 1965).

⁵ Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁶ This work has already been skillfully done by a number of Afary and Anderson's most critical reviewers: see, for example, the reviews by Babak Rahimi in *H-Gender-MidEast* (October 2006) and by Norma Claire Moruzzi in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38.3 (2006) as well as Jonathan Rée, "The Treason of the Clerics," *The Nation* (28 July 2005).

(189). By contrast, Foucault's opponents insisted—and continue to insist—that “a repressive state...was the *inevitable* consequence of the Islamic revolutionary ideology” (117).

Ghamari-Tabrizi shows the concrete political results of such simplified misunderstandings of the Iranian Revolution in the book's fourth chapter, which focuses upon the situation of women in Iran during the postrevolutionary reign of terror and Western feminist interventions during this period. “Intervention” is the right word here, since Ghamari-Tabrizi works to distinguish the efforts of women's and feminist movements in Iran in the wake of the revolution, which engaged critically with the state in a variety of ways while also acknowledging the external threats to the revolution, from the “white woman's burden” that he sees as motivating the engagements of Western feminists with women's rights in Iran. He focuses particularly on Kate Millet, who wrote about her “mission” (her word) to help the women of Iran in her 1982 book *Going to Iran*.⁷ There are two main points Ghamari-Tabrizi articulates about such Western feminist approaches: first, that they partake of the colonial ideology that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has famously characterized as the effort to save brown women from brown men (Ghamari-Tabrizi cites Spivak directly); but perhaps more importantly, that a Western feminist movement that declared itself to be engaging in “international solidarity” failed to realize that it lacked concrete connections to women's movements on the ground in Iran. This failure in turn led Western feminists to miss the fact that Iranian women's organizations largely refused to articulate “women's rights” issues as separate from “general issues of social justice or anti-imperialist demands” (134-135). It must be said that this is not the book's strongest chapter in terms of methodology, as the fine-grained analysis of women's struggles within and after the revolution is subsumed by a critique of second-wave Western feminism that is by now quite familiar. But the larger point about the failure of what might have been a moment of international feminist solidarity is quite important, since it once again highlights the significance of Foucault's contribution in his writings on Iran. Against feminists such as Millet who “disregarded in toto the particularities and contingencies of the Iranian experience”—which meant, among other things, missing the opportunity to examine some of the ideological principles that underwrote their own views of proper political action—Ghamari-Tabrizi finds in Foucault an attempt “to introduce the possibility of thinking outside the universal referent on questions of governmentality and power” (153).

This leads Ghamari-Tabrizi to his concluding argument in the final chapter, which involves asserting that it was Foucault's engagement with the Iranian Revolution, more than anything else, that caused him to revisit the question of enlightenment in his late writings. As he notes, this works directly against the grain of the prevailing view of Foucault on Iran, which is well represented by Afary and Anderson's insistence that Foucault, having refused to admit his “error,” subsequently fell silent on Iran until his death in 1984. By contrast, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues that Foucault in fact “expanded his *reportage* into a more coherent philosophy of enlightenment, ethics, and spirituality” (169)—and, even more directly, that “Foucault read the Iranian Revolution *back into* Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*” (159, emphasis in original). Ghamari-Tabrizi's reading of Foucault's late work is deeply inspiring, since he insistently works against the tendency to depoliticize his late work on ethics and the care of the self. He persuasively reclaims, for example, Foucault's late concept of *parrhesia*, which might too easily be viewed simply as an archaic form of “truth-telling,” as defining a context for addressing those situations when people rise up to declare “I will not obey”—and

⁷ Kate Millet, *Going to Iran* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1982).

further, to risk death in refusing obedience, as in the case of the Iranian Revolution (180-181).

In spite of Ghamari-Tabrizi's virtuosic readings, his ultimate argument that Foucault's experience in Iran provides *the* key to understanding the turn he makes in his late writings doesn't completely convince. But this has to do with the problem inherent in the project itself, which involves reading out of these late writings the forms of concrete historical contextualization that Foucault himself leaves blank (this is, one could add, a project that could be extended to much of Foucault's work). "Did Foucault see a moment of a different kind of modernity brought into being in the Iranian Revolution?" Ghamari-Tabrizi asks towards the end of the book. "Did the revolution elicit a reevaluation of his thoughts about the Enlightenment? In my opinion, the answer on both accounts is yes" (172). The relative rhetorical weakness of such a statement does not, however, undercut the major point, which is that Foucault's late writings on ethics do not represent a turn away from politics and the question of resistance—quite the opposite. Just as Buck-Morss's reading of Hegel simply marks the fact that Hegel's writings on the master-slave dialectic can never be separated from the real historical struggles of masters and slaves, in Haiti and elsewhere, so Ghamari-Tabrizi's reading simply marks the fact that Foucault's late writings on ethics can never be separated from their own concrete historical contexts. Foucault's direct engagements in the last decade of his life with particular forms of political resistance—not just in his writings on Iran, but also in his work with prisoners, with the Solidarity movement in Poland, and with the emerging question of the rights of refugees in the wake of the Vietnam War—are what need to be read back into Foucault's late work, including the moments when he leaves the specific referents blank, as in his 1979 article "Useless to Revolt?":

People do revolt; that is a fact. And that is how subjectivity (not that of great men, but that of anyone) is brought into history, breathing life into it. A convict risks his life to protest unjust punishments; a madman can no longer bear being confined and humiliated; a people refuses the regime that oppresses it. That doesn't make the first innocent, doesn't cure the second, and doesn't ensure for the third the tomorrow it was promised. And by the way, no one is obliged to stand in solidarity with them. No one is obliged to find that these confused voices sing better than the others and speak the truth itself. It is enough that they exist and that they have against them everything that is dead set on shutting them up for there to be a reason to listen to them and to see what they mean to say.⁸

Foucault in Iran gives us powerful insight into how the singular event of the Iranian Revolution generated a distinct transformation in Foucault's thought, and how charting this engagement can in turn deepen our understanding of the revolution itself *as* a singular event.

If there is a next question—not one that Ghamari-Tabrizi's book should be expected to answer, but the one that we as readers are left asking after having read *Foucault in Iran*—it might be articulated as: what is the relationship, if any, between *singularity* and *solidarity*? Indeed, can they co-exist? Ghamari-Tabrizi charts a number of failed efforts at solidarity, most directly by feminists acting in the name of what they declared to be "international solidarity" while missing the fact that they had utterly failed to make connections with

⁸ Michel Foucault, "Useless to Revolt?" in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power* (New York: New Press, 2000), 452, translation slightly modified. First published in *Le Monde* in May 1979.

precisely those women with whom they were claiming to stand. One response to this failure would be to conclude that political acts motivated by a reliance on some sense of “universal” shared principles will always prove to be colonizing, whatever the good intentions. Ghamari-Tabrizi can be read as suggesting this, by drawing such hard and fast distinctions between “singularity” versus “universalizing” impulses, and for the most part he is right to do so, historically speaking. Foucault’s resistance in his late writing, for Ghamari-Tabrizi, is not to politics writ large but rather to “a *political project with a normative and universal Referent*” (164, emphasis in original). In terms of the Iranian Revolution, this meant Foucault’s refusal, often expressed quite movingly, to understand the revolution by simply using already-existing forms of knowledge; revolutions, in this understanding, produce new and unknown forms of subjectivity that need to be addressed in all their singularity. Ghamari-Tabrizi says something similar about the popular uprisings and revolutions throughout the Middle East and North Africa that were occurring as he finished the first draft of the book in 2010-11, which created the same sort of suggestive ambiguity that Foucault found in the Iranian Revolution. Once these events began to be identified and analyzed as “the Arab Spring,” however, something was lost: “In order to make a phenomenon legible, one has to operate within a recognizable assembly of points of references. By naming it the ‘Arab Spring,’ the uprisings entered a conceptual and discursive universe with a written past and a known future direction” (2).

Here, Ghamari-Tabrizi rightly insists, is where Foucault’s writings on Iran can provide a model for us today—not by simply applying particular concepts from Foucault’s work in order to understand what is happening now, but rather, by following his larger attitude and method towards the singularity of revolts as they rise up into view. But if we need to avoid applying normative and universal referents in doing this work, we also need to hold on to the space that would allow those not actively involved in the making of such revolts to struggle towards a place of acting in solidarity with them. The parallel that Ghamari-Tabrizi draws between Foucault and Fanon at the end of the book’s second chapter has to do with their limitations: their limited knowledge of Iran and Algeria, their limited access to the language and culture, their limited sense of how the past continued to haunt the present even amidst the revolutions moving forward in both places. These limitations are real and they have real results, but in a sense, they only become legible because Foucault and Fanon, in quite different ways, place themselves and their intellectual work at the service of revolutions that are not “organically” their own. This is what keeps each one from becoming a mere documenter or chronicler of what he observes amidst these different revolutions, and moves them both towards a different space that is neither clearly that of participant nor of mere observer. The only name for such a space is “solidarity.” What would such a solidarity look like if it could also truly acknowledge the singularity of the struggles with which it hopes to stand? What would a non-normative solidarity look like? These may be the most important political questions today. The fact that *Foucault in Iran* leads us to the threshold of such questions testifies to its place as an exemplary book for our time.

Anthony C. Alessandrini
Professor of English / Middle East Studies
Kingsborough Community College / CUNY Graduate Center

© 2017: Anthony C. Alessandrini

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

Alessandrini, Anthony C., *Rescuing the Revolution from Its Outcome*, *SCTIW Review Book Symposium on Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's Foucault in Iran*, *SCTIW Review*, March 23, 2017. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1405>.

ISSN: 2374-9288