

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

April 4, 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, the Iranian Revolution, and the Politics of Collective Action

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In *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi presents a comprehensive overview of Michel Foucault's writings on the revolutionary wave that swept across Iran, culminating in February 1979 with the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy. According to Ghamari-Tabrizi, Foucault views the revolution "as a phenomenon of history and, at the same time, as a phenomenon that defies it" (2), meaning that it is to be understood as a moment of "historical singularity," owing to its religious impetus, and at the same time as an event "outside the purview of a Western teleological schema" (6). Thus, the revolution can only be "comprehended through an open defiance of a universal history" (7).

Defying that history is tantamount to calling into question the reductionist view of Foucault's historiography of the 1979 uprising as "another botched Orientalist venture" (5) or the "infantile leftism" of a romantic European philosopher" (5), or, even more damning, as the posturing of a "leftist poststructuralist" who failed to anticipate the danger of militant Islamism on the rise in 1979, endorsing it erroneously as an emancipating project. Ghamari-Tabrizi debunks such views by analyzing Foucault's work on the revolution through the prism of a conceptual framework that represents a radical departure from "Eurocentric theories of power, politics, and history" (xiii). These theories are of particular interest at the moment in Social Movement Studies where the 1979 revolution remains a subject of heated debate on account of both its theoretical implications as well as its impact on Iran and more broadly the entire Middle East region. It is for these reasons that *Foucault in Iran* will be examined here largely in reference to this field.

Key to Foucault's reading of the revolution is his concept of "political

spirituality,”¹ grounded in an “understanding on the part of Iranians that to change society, they must first change themselves,”² i.e., “renew their entire existence” by undergoing “a spiritual experience.”³ Far from possessing some kind of regressive, dogmatic and/or religious doctrinal essence or orientation, the latter is, for Ghamari-Tabrizi, a form of “political expression” working to “liberate [the] body from the prison house of [the] soul” (63). This stands as “an alternative to historical determinism” (62) in that it “perpetuate[s] the hermeneutics of the subject on the streets of revolutionary Iran” (65), thereby giving rise to a form of collective action that Eurocentric theories of emancipation and collective action are unable to account for.

This Foucauldian, non-Eurocentric, perspective predicated on the concept of political spirituality can be used, as Ghamari-Tabrizi points out, to debunk certain assumptions underpinning mainstream social movement theories. European social movement theorists Alberto Melucci and Alain Touraine, for instance, conceptualize the latter as a “regressive utopianism”⁴ or as an “anti-movement,”⁵ and in the process “de-authenticate” it by reducing it to a manifestation of “Islamic fundamentalism.”⁶ As such, it is cast as an exemplar of reactionary, anti-democratic, and anti-modern movements instigated by “traditional,” i.e., “premodern,” peoples. The revolution transpired in what Touraine and Melucci broadly view—on the basis of their theories of “post-industrialized”⁷ and/or “information”⁸ societies, respectively—to be a “non-progressive” geographical context, i.e., one both economically underdeveloped and technologically/politically backward. For Touraine, the revolution lies, *at best*, “within history,”⁹ because Iranian society had not achieved the “highest level of historicity,” as had certain Western societies, in terms of material and economic development. Therefore, Touraine contends, the 1979 revolution necessarily lacked what he terms the “moral movements” of the West, so-called because of their aim to “defe[nd]...the rights of the subject...his freedom and equality.”¹⁰ Melucci takes an even dimmer view of the events of 1979, dismissing them as “a mythical quest for the Lost Paradise,”¹¹ which “crystaliz[ed] into fanatic fundamentalism.”¹²

For those luminaries within the American social movement studies camp, the 1979 revolution was seen as “anti-modern,” “backward,” and plagued by violence, and therefore

¹ Michel Foucault, “What are the Iranians Dreaming About,” in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 209.

² Navid Pourmokhtari, “Protestation and Mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa: A Foucauldian Model,” *Foucault Studies*, 22, 202.

³ Foucault, “What are the Iranians Dreaming About,” 255.

⁴ Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 104.

⁵ Alain Touraine, *The Return of the Actor: Social Theory in Postindustrial Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 64.

⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of this point, see Pourmokhtari, “Protestation and Mobilization,” 193-195.

⁷ Touraine, *The Return of the Actor*.

⁸ Melucci, *Challenging Codes*.

⁹ Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 105.

¹⁰ Alain Touraine, quoted in Laurie E. Adkin, “The Rise and Fall of New Social Movement Theory?” in A. B. Bakan and E. MacDonald, eds., *Critical Political Studies: Debates and Dialogues from the Left* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 290.

¹¹ Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 104.

¹² *Ibid.*, 105.

warranting the catchword “ugly movements.”¹³ Thus, for example, in his analysis of the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, Sidney Tarrow concludes that its excessive violence, backwardness, and religious fanaticism was rooted in the revolutionary wave that swept across Iran two decades earlier.

It is in light of this “exceptionalist” view of the revolution that one must gauge Ghamari-Tabrizi’s analysis of Foucault’s writings on the 1979 revolution. In particular, by bringing to bear the Foucauldian concept of “political spirituality,” he is able to demonstrate how and why the revolution defies conventional analyses that conceptualize/theorize it as religiously dogmatic, sociopolitically backward, and inherently fundamentalist. The author dismisses such claims by, among other things, showcasing how in 1979 religion was used as a form of “stylization” or “mode of expression and/or resistance,” as Foucault would have put it, in opposition to the Shah’s autocratic rule.

At the same time, however, Ghamari-Tabrizi articulates neither the full implications/significance of Foucault’s work on the 1979 revolution nor its intent. In his view, Foucault’s real purpose in writing about the revolution is “to transcend [it] outside the discursive frames that make revolution[s] legible” (xiii). In other words, Foucault examines the events of 1979 “without subjecting [them] to the logic of historical inevitabilities” (2), i.e., as “a moment of making history outside the purview of a Western teleological schema” (6). Thus, in 1979 there occurred in Iran a “revolution that did not simply fit into the normative progressive discourses of history” (189).

And while this captures part of Foucault’s intent, it ignores, or at best downplays, the far more ambitious project of proposing an alternative theory of modernity, illustrated with accounts of multiple modernities and, by implication, collective action. Indeed, time and time again he references the 1979 revolution for this very purpose. Thus, for example, Foucault describes the events of 1979 as “a revolt that [was] the most modern and insane,”¹⁴ in part because it “lack[ed]...political organization [and was] disengage[d] from...[the kind of] internal politics”¹⁵ often associated with Western oppositional movements of the time, in part because the revolutionary cadres used modern technology, e.g., cassette tapes, to mobilize the masses.¹⁶

Elsewhere, Foucault opines that, in contrast to contemporary oppositional movements in the West, the Iranian revolution took the form of “a spontaneous uprising” sustained by a people’s “political will”¹⁷ and then played out in a semi-organized fashion. This notion of “political will” lies at the heart of Foucault’s alternative account of *collective agency*, being instrumental in “open[ing] up a spiritual dimension in politics”¹⁸ that “transverses the entire people.”¹⁹ Herein lies a departure from Eurocentric accounts of collective action, grounded in a linear conception of sociopolitical progress and economic development, and, in

¹³ See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 94.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” in J. Afary and K. B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 222.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Michel Foucault, “The Revolt in Iran Spreads on Cassette Tapes,” in J. Afary and K. B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” 222.

¹⁸ Foucault, “What are the Iranians Dreaming About,” 208.

¹⁹ Foucault, “Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit,” in J. Afary and K. B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 256.

particular, the then dominant Marxist doctrine of economic and class reductionism. Thus, in articulating “political will” or “political spirituality” as the central pillar of his alternative theory of modernity, Foucault brings into question the relevance of the Iranian case to theorizing and how it bore little relevance to the dominant Marxist account:

People always quote Marx and the opium of the people. The sentence that immediately preceded that statement and which is never quoted says that religion is the spirit of a world without spirit. Let’s say, then, that Islam, in that year of 1978, was not the opium of the people precisely because it was the spirit of a world without spirit.²⁰

Moving beyond the hegemonic and universalizing concepts, e.g., “political opportunity,”²¹ used by Social Movement theories to explicate the development and emergence of cases of collective action, Foucault’s alternative theory of modernity/collective action posits a contextually bound and geographically specific framework wherein this process unfolds. It also specifies that juncture when power, understood in its multifaceted and context-based modalities—e.g., sovereign, disciplinary, etc.—loses its efficacy, at which point, Foucault opines, “life can no longer be bought.”²² It is at this precipitous moment that a people come to “prefer...the risk of death over the certainty of having to obey.”²³ When such moments arrive, the masses pour onto the streets, crying out “[we] will no longer obey,”²⁴ i.e., a “governmentalizing regime” and its modalities of power.²⁵ Thus, beyond what Ghamari-Tabrizi envisions to be his subject’s real intent in analyzing the 1979 revolution, it is clear that Foucault’s primary interest lies in formulating a full-fledged alternative theory of modernity and, by implication, a theory of collective action.

Nonetheless, Ghamari-Tabrizi offers up an insightful and compelling account of how Foucault’s insights on the Iranian revolution serve to undermine the universal view of

²⁰ Ibid., 255.

²¹ See, for example, Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); H. Kitschelt, “Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-nuclear Movements in Four Democracies,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 16(1), 1986, 57-85.

²² Michel Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?” in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 449.

²³ Foucault quoted in J. Simons, “Power, Resistance, and Freedom,” in C. Falzon, T. O’Leary, and J. Sawicki, eds., *A Companion to Foucault* (Malden Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 85.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, “Debating the Outcome of the Revolution,” in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 129.

²⁵ And indeed, what drove Iranians to oppose the Pahlavi regime in the first place was its “governmentalizing rule”—i.e., a sovereign rule sustained by certain disciplinary modalities of power—in particular, what Foucault labels the Shah’s “archaic modernization,” a project inspired by a “Kemalist program...of modernization” and driven by the Shah’s “messianic mission” to restore the grandeur and glory of ancient Persia. Archaic modernization was driven by “a corrupt and despotic system” with the sovereign, i.e., the Shah, at its helm, and enabled by SAVAK, a security force responsible for maintaining public order at any cost and by means of various disciplinary methods and techniques. See Michel Foucault, “The Shah is a Hundred Years Behind the Times,” in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 195. In 1979, according to Foucault, “[t]his [governmentalizing project] [was] utterly rejected” by a radicalized mass of people, who were at the same time determined to confront and counteract those diverse modalities of power by collectively opposing the Pahlavis (see *ibid.*, 196).

“modernity” and sociopolitical “development” that so often informs analyses by leading social movement theorists. It is my view that *Foucault in Iran* will inspire scholars to undertake a contextually based and historically specific study, not just of the Iranian revolution, but more generally of oppositional movements throughout the Middle East region.

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Citation Information

Pourmokhtari, Navid, *Foucault, the Iranian Revolution, and the Politics of Collective Action*, *SCTIW Review Book Symposium on Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's Foucault in Iran*, *SCTIW Review*, April 4, 2017. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1412>.

ISSN: 2374-9288