Revisiting Foucault and the Iranian Revolution

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FEBRUARY 2004 MARKED THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY of the Iranian Revolution. From September 1978 to February 1979, in the course of a massive urban revolution with millions of participants, the Iranian people toppled the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979), which had pursued a highly authoritarian program of economic and cultural modernization. By late 1978, the Islamist faction led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had come to dominate the antiregime uprising, in which secular nationalists, democrats, and leftists also participated. The Islamists controlled the slogans and the organization of the protests, which meant that many secular women protesters were pressured into donning the veil (*chador*) as an expression of solidarity with the more traditional Iranian Muslims. By February 1979, the shah had left the country and Khomeini returned from exile to take power. The next month, he sponsored a national referendum that declared Iran an Islamic republic by an overwhelming majority. Soon after, as Khomeini began to assume nearly absolute power, a reign of terror ensued.

Progressive and leftist intellectuals around the world were initially very divided in their assessments of the Iranian Revolution. While they supported the overthrow of the shah, they were usually less enthusiastic about the notion of an Islamic republic. Foucault visited and wrote on Iran during this period, a period when he was at the height of his intellectual powers. He had recently published *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and Vol. I of *History of Sexuality* (1976) and was working on material for Vol. II and III of the latter. Since their publication, the reputation of these writings has grown rather than diminished and they have helped us to conceptualize gender, sexuality, knowledge, power, and culture in new and important ways. Paradoxically, however, his extensive writings and interviews on the Iranian Revolution have experienced a different fate, ignored or dismissed even by thinkers closely identified with Foucault's perspectives.

Attempts to bracket out Foucault's writings on Iran as "miscalculations," or even "not Foucauldian," remind one of what Foucault himself had criticized in his well-known 1969 essay, "What Is an Author?" When we include certain works in an author's career and exclude others that were written in "a different style," or were "inferior," we create a stylistic unity and a theoretical coherence, he wrote. We do so, he added, by privileging certain writings as authentic and excluding others that do not fit our view of what the author ought to be: "The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (Rabinow 1984).

Throughout his life, Foucault's concept of authenticity meant looking at situations where people lived dangerously and flirted with death, a site where creativity originated. In the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Bataille, Foucault embraced the artist who pushed the limits of rationality and he wrote with great passion in defense of irrationalities that broke new boundaries. In 1978, Foucault found such morbid transgressive powers in the revolutionary figure of Ayatollah Khomeini and the millions who risked death as they followed him in the course of the revolution. He knew that such "limit" experiences could lead to new forms of creativity and he passionately threw in his support. This was Foucault's only first-hand experience of revolution and it led to his most extensive set of writings on a non-Western society.

Distinctive Positions

FOUCAULT FIRST VISITED IRAN in September 1978 and then met with Khomeini at his exile residence outside Paris in October. He traveled to Iran for a second visit in November, when the revolutionary movement against the shah was reaching its zenith. During these two trips, Foucault was commissioned as a special correspondent of the leading Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera,* with his articles appearing on page one of that paper. He published other parts of his writings on Iran in French newspapers and journals, such as the daily *Le Monde* and the widely circulated leftist weekly *Nouvel Observateur*. Student activists translated at least one of his essays into Persian and posted it on the walls of Tehran University in the fall of 1978.

Foucault staked out a series of distinctive political and theoretical positions on the Iranian Revolution. In part because only three of his fifteen articles and interviews on Iran have appeared in English, they have generated little discussion in the English-speaking world. Many scholars of Foucault view these writings as aberrant or the product of a political mistake. We believe that Foucault's writings on Iran were in fact closely related to his general theoretical writings on the discourses of power and the hazards of modernity.

Long before most other commentators, Foucault understood, and this to his credit, that Iran was witnessing a singular kind of revolution. Early on, he predicted that this revolution would not follow the model of other modern revolutions. He wrote that it was organized around a sharply different concept, which he called "spiritual politics." Foucault recognized the enormous power of the new discourse of militant Islam, not just for Iran, but globally. He showed that the new Islamist movement aimed at a fundamental cultural, social, as well as political break with the modern Western order, as well as with the Soviet Union and China.

The Iranian experience also raises some serious questions about Foucault's thought. First, it is often assumed that Foucault's suspicion of utopianism, his hostility to grand narratives and universals, and his stress on difference and singularity rather than totality, would make him less likely than his predecessors on the left to romanticize an authoritarian politics that promised radically to refashion from above the lives and thought of a people, for their ostensible benefit. However, his Iran writings showed that Foucault was not immune to the type of illusions that so many Western leftists had held toward the Soviet Union and later, China. Foucault did not anticipate the birth of yet another modern state where old religious technologies of domination could be refashioned and institutionalized; this was a state that combined a traditionalist ideology (Islam) with the anti- imperialist discourse of the left, but also equipped itself with modern technologies of organization, surveillance, warfare, and propaganda.

Second, Foucault's highly problematic relationship to feminism becomes more than an intellectual lacuna in the case of Iran. On a few occasions, Foucault reproduced statements he had heard from religious figures on gender relations in a possible future Islamic republic, but he never questioned the "separate but equal" message of the Islamists. Foucault also dismissed feminist premonitions that the revolution was headed in a dangerous direction. He seemed to regard such warnings as little more than Orientalist attacks on Islam, thereby depriving himself of a more balanced perspective toward the events in Iran. At a more general level, Foucault remained insensitive toward the diverse ways in which power affected women, as against men. He ignored the fact that those most traumatized by premodern disciplinary practices were often woman and children.

Third, an examination of Foucault's writings provides more support for the frequently-articulated criticism that his one-sided critique of modernity needs to be seriously reconsidered, especially from the vantage point of many non-Western societies. A number of Middle Eastern intellectuals have been grappling with their own versions of the Enlightenment project over the past century. The questions in the Middle East are quite concrete. Should such societies, which are often dominated by

secular or religious despotic orders, ignore the juridico-legal legacies of the West? Or can they combine aspects of Foucault's theory of power and critiques of modernity with a modern secular state? This is an issue that is hotly debated in many Middle Eastern countries today, especially in Iran and within Iranian exilic communities. Indeed, there are some indications that Foucault himself was moving in such a direction at the end of his life. In his 1984 "What Is Enlightenment?" essay (Rabinow 1984), he put forth a position on the Enlightenment that was more nuanced than before.

Foucault's Analysis

In France, the controversy over Foucault's writings on Iran is well known. For example, during the debate that followed the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, a prominent French commentator referred polemically and without apparent need for any further explanation to "Michel Foucault, advocate of Khomeinism in Iran and therefore in theory of its exactions," this in a front-page op-ed article in *Le Monde* (Minc 2001). Even French commentators more sympathetic to Foucault have acknowledged the extremely problematic nature of his stance on Iran. Biographer Didier Eribon (1991), himself an editor at *Nouvel Observateur* and a friend of Foucault, wrote: "The criticism and sarcasm that greeted Foucault's ‘mistake' concerning Iran added further to his despondency after what he saw as the qualified critical reception" of Volume I of the *History of Sexuality*. Eribon added: "For a long time thereafter Foucault rarely commented on politics or journalism." Eribon has furnished us with what is to date the most detailed and balanced discussion of Foucault and Iran. Another French biographer, Jeannette Colombel (1994), who was also a friend of Foucault, concludes that the controversy "wounded him."

The English-speaking world has seen less discussion of Foucault's Iran writings. One exception is the intellectual biography by the political philosopher James Miller (1993), who characterized Foucault's Iran episode as one of "folly." Miller was the only biographer to suggest that Foucault's fascination with death played a part in his enthusiasm for the Iranian Islamists, with their emphasis on mass martyrdom. David Macey, the author of the most comprehensive biography of Foucault to date, was more equivocal. Macey (1993) regarded the French attacks on Foucault over Iran as exaggerated and mean-spirited, but he nonetheless acknowledged that Foucault was so "impressed" by what he saw in Iran in 1978 that he misread "the probable future developments he was witnessing." Elsewhere in the English-speaking world, where Foucault's writings on Iran have been only selectively translated and the contemporary French responses to him not translated at all, his Iran writings have been treated more kindly. His last two articles on Iran, where he rather belatedly made a few criticisms of the Islamic regime in the face of the attacks on him by other French intellectuals, have been the most widely circulated ones among those that have appeared in English up to now. They are the only examples of his Iran writings to be found in the three-volume collection, *The Essential Writings of Michel Foucault*, issued recently by the New Press (Foucault 2000).

Foucault's problematic treatment of Iranian Islamism was partly due to the fact that he ignored the warnings of Iranian and Western feminists as well as secular leftists, who, early on, had developed a more balanced and critical attitude toward the revolution. This undercut what were in other respects some valuable analyses of the nature of the shah's regime and its Islamist opposition.

Foucault carried out a probing analysis of the shah's regime in his October 1978 article for *Corriere della Sera*, "The Shah Is One Hundred Years Behind the Times."[1] He wrote that in Iran, "modernization" took the form of the shah's authoritarian policies. Situating himself in a postmodern position, he argued that the shah's plan for "secularization and modernization," handed down by his father Reza Shah, a brutal dictator known for "his famous gaze," was itself retrograde and archaic. Here one can discern echoes of his *Discipline and Punish*, published three years earlier. The Pahlavi shahs were the guardians of a modernizing disciplinary state that subjected all of the people of Iran to the intense gaze of their overlords. Most notably, Foucault was criticizing the surveillance

methods and disciplinary practices adopted by the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah and his notorious secret police, the SAVAK, whose methods and practices remained brutal and retrograde.

Later, in February 1979, just after Khomeini had assumed power, Foucault made an astute prediction in his article, "A Powder Keg Called Islam," also in *Corriere della sera*. He mocked the hopes of French and Iranian Marxists, who had believed that Khomeini would now be pushed aside by the Marxist Left: "Religion played its role of opening the curtain; the Mullahs will now disperse themselves, taking off in a big group of black and white robes. The decor is changing. The first act is going to begin: that of the struggle of the classes, of the armed vanguards, and of the party that organizes the masses, etc."

In ridiculing the notion that the secular nationalist or Marxist left would now take center stage and displace the clerics, Foucault made a keen assessment of the balance of forces. Indeed, he exhibited quite a remarkable perspicacity, especially given the fact that he was not a specialist on either Iran or Islam. Even more importantly, he noted, a new type of revolutionary movement had emerged, one that would have an impact far beyond Iran's borders and would also have major effect on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: "But perhaps its historic importance will not hinge on its conformity to a recognized ‘revolutionary' model. Rather, it will owe its importance to the potential that it will have to overturn the existing political situation in the Middle East and thus the global strategic equilibrium. Its singularity, which has constituted up until this point its force, consequently threatens to create its power of expansion. Indeed, it is correct to say that, as an ‘Islamic' movement, it can set the entire region afire, overturn the most unstable regimes, and disturb the most solid. Islam — which is not simply a religion, but an entire way of life, an adherence to a history and a civilization — has a good chance to become a gigantic powder keg, at the level of hundreds of millions of men."

While Foucault's insight into Islamism's global reach was surely prescient, this was undercut by Foucault's uncritical stance toward Islamism as a political movement. In October 1978, during the period when the first nationwide strike was taking place in Iran, he decided to publish his views on Iran in French for the first time in an article entitled "Of What Are the Iranians Dreaming?" for *Nouvel Observateur*. Foucault described the current struggle in mythic terms: "The situation in Iran seems to depend on a great joust under traditional emblems, those of the king and the saint, the armed sovereign and the destitute exile, the despot faced with the man who stands up bare-handed and is acclaimed by a people."

As to the saintlike Khomeini's advocacy of "an Islamic government," Foucault was reassuring. He noted that "there is an absence of hierarchy in the clergy" and "a dependence (even a financial one) on those who listen to them." The clerics were not only democratic; they also possessed a creative political vision: "One thing must be clear. By ‘Islamic government,' nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clergy would have a role of supervision or control. . . . It is something very old and also very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet, but also of advancing toward a luminous and distant point where it would be possible to renew fidelity rather than maintain obedience. In pursuit of this ideal, the distrust of legalism seemed to me to be essential, along with a faith in the creativity of Islam."

Foucault also attempted to reassure his French readers concerning the rights of women and religious/ethnic minorities. His sources, who were close to the Islamists, assured him: "With respect to liberties, they will be respected to the extent that their usage will not harm others; minorities will be protected and free to live as they please on the condition that they do not injure the majority; between men and women there will not be inequality with respect to rights, but difference, since there is a natural difference." He concluded the article by referring to the crucial place of "political spirituality" in Iran and the loss of such spirituality in early modern Europe. This was something, he

wrote, "whose possibility we have forgotten ever since the Renaissance and the great crises of Christianity." Already poised for the sharp responses he knew such views would receive in the highly charged world of Parisian intellectual debate, he said that he knew that his French readers would "laugh" at such a formulation. But, he retorted, "I know that they are wrong."

Islam as a Political Force

FOUCAULT'S SUGGESTION THAT HIS *Nouvel Observateur* article would stir up controversy turned out to be correct, perhaps more so than he had anticipated. *Nouvel Observateur* published, in its November 6 issue, excerpts of a letter from the pseudonymous "Atoussa H.," a leftist Iranian woman living in exile in France, who took strong exception to Foucault's uncritical stance toward the Islamists. She declared: "I am very distressed by the matter of fact commentaries usually made by the French left with respect to the prospect of an ‘Islamic' government replacing the bloody tyranny of the shah."[2] Foucault, she wrote, seemed "deeply moved by ‘Muslim spirituality,' which, according to him, would be an improvement over the ferocious capitalist dictatorship, which is today beginning to fall apart." Why, she continued, alluding to the 1953 overthrow of the democratic and leftist Mossadeq government, must the Iranian people, "after twenty-five years of silence and oppression" be forced to choose between "the SAVAK and religious fanaticism?" Unveiled women were already being insulted on the streets and Khomeini supporters had made clear that "in the regime they want to create, women will have to adhere" to Islamic law. With respect to statements that ethnic and religious minorities would have their rights "so long as they do not harm the majority," Atoussa H. asked pointedly: "Since when have the minorities begun to ‘harm'" the majority?

Returning to the problematic notion of an Islamic government, Atoussa H. pointed to the brutal forms of justice in Saudi Arabia: "Heads and hands are cut off, for thieves and lovers." She concluded: "Many Iranians are, like me, distressed and desperate about the thought of an ‘Islamic' government. . . . The Western liberal left needs to know that Islamic law can become a dead weight on societies hungering for change. They should not let themselves be seduced by a cure that is perhaps worse than the disease." Foucault, in a short rejoinder published the following week in *Nouvel Observateur*, wrote that what was "intolerable" about Atoussa H.'s letter, was her "merging together" of all forms of Islam into one and then "scorning" Islam as "fanatical." It was certainly discerning on Foucault's part to note in his response that Islam "as a political force is an essential problem for our epoch and for the years to come." But this prediction was seriously undercut by his utter refusal to share any of her critique of political Islam. Instead, he concluded his rejoinder by lecturing Atoussa H.: "The first condition for approaching it [Islam] with a minimum of intelligence is not to begin by bringing in hatred." In March and April 1979, once the Khomeini regime's atrocities against women and homosexuals began, this exchange would come back to haunt Foucault.

While many prominent French intellectuals had become caught up in the enthusiasm of the Iranian upheaval in late 1978, none to our knowledge followed Foucault in siding so explicitly with the Islamists against the secular Marxist or nationalist left. Others with more background in Middle Eastern history were less sanguine altogether, notably the leading French specialist on Islam, Maxime Rodinson. An historian who had worked since the 1950s in the Marxian tradition and the author of the classic biography *Muhammad* (1961) and of *Islam and Capitalism* (1966), his leftist credentials were very strong. Rodinson's prescient three-part article entitled "The Awakening of Islamic Fundamentalism?" appeared on the front page of *Le Monde* in December 1978.[3]

As he publicly revealed some years later, in this article Rodinson was responding to Foucault's earlier evocation of a "political spirituality." However, in a time-honored tradition of Parisian intellectual debate, Rodinson chose not to name Foucault. For those in France who had followed Foucault's writings on Iran, however, Rodinson's references in this December 1978 article were

clear enough, as they undoubtedly were to Foucault himself. Rodinson poured cold water on the hopes of many on the left for an emancipatory outcome in Iran. He pointed to specific ways in which the ideology of an Islamic state carried with it many reactionary features: "Even a minimalist Islamic fundamentalism would require, according to the Koran, that the hands of thieves be cut off and that a woman's share of the inheritance be cut in half. If there is a return to tradition, as the men of religion want, then it will be necessary to whip the wine drinker and whip or stone the adulterer…Nothing will be easier or more dangerous than this time-honored accusation: my adversary is an 'enemy of God'." Bringing to bear the perspectives of historical materialism, he wrote: "It is astonishing, after centuries of common experience, that it is still necessary to recall one of the best attested laws of history. Good moral intentions, whether or not endorsed by the deity, are a weak basis for determining the practical policies of states." What lay in store for Iran, he worried, was not a liberation but "a semi-archaic fascism."

By spring 1979, these controversies came to a boil. At the March 8, 1979 International Women's Day demonstration, the repressive character of Iran's new Islamist regime suddenly became quite apparent to many of the Iranian Revolution's international supporters. On that day, Iranian women activists and their male supporters demonstrated in Tehran against an order for women to re-veil themselves in the chador worn in more traditional sectors of society. The demonstrations continued for five days. At their height, they grew to fifty thousand in Tehran, women as well as men. Some leftist men formed a cordon around the women, fighting off armed attackers from a newly formed group, the Hezbollah or "Party of God." The demonstrators chanted "No to the Chador," "Down with the Dictatorship," and even the occasional "Down with Khomeini." One banner read, "We made the Revolution for Freedom, But Got Unfreedom," while others proclaimed "At the Dawn of Freedom, There Is No Freedom." For their part, the Hezbollah chanted "You will cover yourselves or be beaten," but their response was mainly nonverbal: stones, knives, and even bullets. After support demonstrations also took place in Paris, Simone de Beauvoir issued a statement of solidarity on March 19: "We have created the International Committee for Women's Rights (CIDF) in response to calls from a large number of Iranian women, whose situation and whose revolt have greatly moved us…We have appreciated the depth of the utter humiliation into which others wanted to make them fall and we have therefore resolved to struggle for them."

On March 24, a highly polemical article directed against Foucault appeared in *Le Matin*, a leftist daily that had editorialized forcefully against what it called Khomeini's "road toward counter-revolution and moral regulation." Entitled "Of What Are the Philosophers Dreaming?"[4] and written by the feminist journalists Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, it derided Foucault's enthusiastic praise of the Islamist movement: "Returning from Iran a few months ago, Michel Foucault stated that he was 'impressed' by the 'attempt to open a spiritual dimension in politics' that he discerned in project on an Islamic government. Today there are little girls all in black, veiled from head to toe; women stabbed precisely because they do not want to wear the veil; summary executions for homosexuality; the creation of a 'Ministry of Guidance According to the Precepts of the Koran;' thieves and adulterous women flagellated." Alluding to his *Discipline and Punish*, they referred ironically to "this spirituality that disciplines and punishes." The Broyelles mocked Foucault's notions of "political spirituality" and asked if this was connected to the "spiritual meaning" of the summary executions of homosexuals then taking place in Iran. They also called upon Foucault to admit that his thinking on Iran had been "in error." Foucault's response, published two days later, was in fact a non-response. He would not respond, he wrote, "because throughout 'my life' I have never taken part in polemics. I have no intention of beginning now." He wrote further, "I am 'summoned to acknowledge my errors'." He hinted that it was the Broyelles who were engaging in thought control by the manner in which they had called him to account.

Unproblematic Sympathy

AT THIS POINT THE CONTROVERSY was fueled by the appearance of Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet's book *Iran: la Révolution au nom de Dieu*, published at the end of March. It included a lengthy interview with Foucault by the two authors that discussed the events in Iran. The interview, which appears to have been conducted before Khomeini assumed power in February, was entitled "Iran: The Spirit of a Spiritless World." Unfortunately for Foucault's reputation, this enthusiastic discussion of Iran's Islamist movement was mentioned frequently in reviews of the book, which appeared in the immediate aftermath of the March women's demonstrations and amid the growing reports of atrocities against gay men, Baha'is, and Kurds. The book achieved a certain notoriety because of its timeliness and months later, it was still the most prominently displayed title on the Iranian Revolution in Paris bookstores.

In the interview, Foucault began his analysis of Iran by complaining that "the Iranian affair and the way in which it has unfolded have not aroused the same type of unproblematic sympathy as Portugal, for example, or Nicaragua." He deplored the Western left's "unease when confronted by a phenomenon that is, for our political mentality, very curious." In Iran, he added, religion offered something deeper than ideology: "It really has been the vocabulary, the ceremonial, the timeless drama into which one could fit the historical drama of a people that pitted its very existence against that of its sovereign." Because Shi'ism had been part of the Iranian culture for centuries, and because the revolutionary drama was played out through this religious discourse, Foucault believed that Shi'ism, "a religion of combat and sacrifice," would not play the role of a modern ideology, one that would "mask contradictions." What Foucault perceived as Iran's unified historico-cultural discourse system seemed to override those "contradictions" with which, he acknowledged in passing, "Iranian society" was "shot through."

What's more, when Blanchet warned of uncritical euphoria with respect to the events in Iran, referring to his and Brière's experience in China during the Cultural Revolution, Foucault refused the implications of a more questioning, critical stance. Disagreeing directly with Blanchet, Foucault insisted on the uniqueness of the events in Iran vis-á-vis China: "All the same, the Cultural Revolution was certainly presented as a struggle between certain elements of the population and certain others, certain elements in the party and certain others, or between the population and the party, etc. Now what struck me in Iran is that there is no struggle between different elements. What gives it such beauty, and at the same time such gravity, is that there is only one confrontation: between the entire people and the state power threatening them with its weapons and police." Here, Foucault's denial of any social or political differentiation among the Iranian "people" was absolutely breathtaking.

Finally, about nine-tenths of the way through the interview, after more prodding by both Blanchet and Brière, Foucault acknowledged a single contradiction within the Iranian Revolution, that of xenophobic nationalism and anti-Semitism. We can quote these statements in full, since they are so brief. First, he noted: "There were demonstrations, verbal at least, of virulent anti- Semitism. There were demonstrations of xenophobia, and not only against the Americans, but also against foreign workers [including many Afghans] who had come to work in Iran." Then, somewhat later, he added: "What has given the Iranian movement its intensity has been a double register. On the one hand, a collective will that has been very strongly expressed politically and, on the other hand, the desire for a radical change in ordinary life. But this double affirmation can only be based on traditions, institutions that carry a charge of chauvinism, nationalism, exclusiveness, that have a very powerful attraction for individuals."

Here, for the first time in his discussions of Iran, Foucault acknowledged that the religious and nationalist myths through which the Islamists had mobilized the masses were full of "chauvinism, nationalism, exclusiveness." At the same time, however, and what continued to override the possibility of a more critical perspective, was the fact that he was so enamored by the ability of the

Islamists to galvanize tens of millions of people through such traditions that he ignored the dangers. Strikingly, in the entire interview, Foucault never addressed the dangers facing Iranian women, even after Brière recounted, albeit with a big apologia for the Islamists, an incident in which she had been physically threatened for trying to join a group of male journalists during a 1978 demonstration.

At the end of March, soon after *Iran: la Révolution au nom de Dieu* appeared, a review in *Le Monde* emphasized the interview, calling Foucault's position "questionable." Days later, another critique of Foucault appeared in a review in *Nouvel Observateur* by Jean Lacouture, the veteran journalist and biographer. Lacouture argued that the book "poses important issues with a rather abrupt simplicity that becomes most apparent in the concluding conversation between the two authors and Michel Foucault." The biggest problem with the book and with Foucault's contribution, Lacouture added, was the way in which "the unanimous character of the movement" was emphasized in a one-sided fashion. Something similar to this so- called "unanimity" for Islam was also observed, erroneously it turned out, during China's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, he concluded. Still another attack on Foucault soon appeared in *L'Express*, a mass-circulation centrist weekly, in which the prominent journalist Bernard Ullmann wrote that Foucault's interview "did not have the same prudence" as the rest of the book in assessing the possible dangers of an Islamist regime in Iran.

Foucault never responded directly to these various attacks on him in the reviews of *Iran: la Révolution au nom de Dieu.* Unlike some of the previous attacks on his writings, for example those by Sartre and de Beauvoir on his *The Order of Things* (1966), hardly anyone defended Foucault's Iran writings. One exception was the post-structuralist feminist Catherine Clément, who wrote in *Le Matin* that Foucault had simply "tried to discern what has escaped our intellectual expectations" and that "no schema, including that of 'Human Rights' within our tradition, can be applied *directly* to this country, which makes it revolution from its own culture." Foucault published two more articles on Iran in April and May 1979, one of them for *Le Monde*, in which he made a few very mild criticisms of the revolution. Then he lapsed into silence over Iran.

The Significance of Gender

IN THE TWO AND A HALF DECADES since 1979, the tremors set off by the Iranian Revolution helped in no small way to spark an international series of Islamist movements. Radical Islamists have taken power or staged destructive civil wars in a number of countries, from Algeria to Egypt and from Sudan to Afghanistan, in the latter case with U.S. support. These regimes and movements have been responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths and for numerous setbacks to women's rights throughout the Muslim world. Islamism gained such power and influence during a period when equally retrogressionist Christian, Hindu, and Jewish religious fundamentalist movements were also on the rise, all of them inimical to women's rights. The September 11 attacks were a dramatic and horrific example of the dangers of such religious fanaticism.

Two questions for today emerge from Foucault's Iran writings. First, were these writings aberrations, largely the product of his ignorance of Iranian history and culture? This is what Maxime Rodinson suggested in his critiques of Foucault. We think not. We note that de Beauvoir and other French feminists took a markedly different stance, one that holds up better today, although they had little specialist knowledge of Iran. We suggest that Foucault's Iran writings reveal, albeit in exaggerated form, some problems in his overall perspective, especially its one-sided critique of modernity. In this sense, the Iran writings contribute something important to our understanding of this major social philosopher.

A second issue for today concerns the whole issue of religious fundamentalism, more important

than ever to debates over the crisis of modernity since September 11, 2001. The international left's failure to chart an adequate response to religious fundamentalism is not Michel Foucault's problem alone. It is ours today as well. And this is no easy task, just as in past decades it was not easy to chart a leftist perspective independent of Stalinism and Maoism. As Maxime Rodinson later wrote, with a measure of Gallic humanism: "Those who, like the author of these lines, refused for so long to believe the reports about the crimes committed in the name of the triumphant socialism in the former Tsarist Empire, in the terrible human dramas resulting from the Soviet Revolution, would exhibit bad grace if they became indignant at the incredulity of the Muslim masses before all the spots that one asks them to view on the radiant sun of their hope. Michel Foucault is not contemptible for not having wanted to create despair in the Muslim world's shantytowns and starving countryside, for not having wanted to lose hope, or for that matter, to lose hope in the worldwide importance of their hopes." And, as we have seen above, hope needs to be tempered by a critical spirit cognizant above all of the significance of gender in an era of religious fundamentalism.

Footnotes

1. These and other quotations from Foucault's Iran writings are from the appendix to Afary and Anderson, where they are all translated, in most cases for the first time.

2. This letter is translated in the appendix to Afary and Anderson.

3. Rodinson's critiques of Foucault are translated, some of them for the first time, in the appendix to Afary and Anderson.

4. Beauvoir's statement, and Broyelle and Broyelle's article, are translated in the appendix to Afary and Anderson.

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