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Foucault's Orient: The Conundrum of Cultural Difference, From Tunisia to Japan

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*Foucault's Orient: The Conundrum of Cultural Difference, From Tunisia to Japan*, by **Marnia Lazreg**. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017. 282 pp. ISBN: 9781785336225.

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Written by a leading sociological theorist of gender with roots in North Africa, *Foucault's Orient* is the most comprehensive survey to date of the French poststructuralist's perceptions of and writings on non-Western societies. Marnia Lazreg has mined Foucault's writings in English and their French originals, and also conducted interviews with an impressive number of his collaborators and interlocutors in France, Tunisia, Iran, and Japan. In addition, Lazreg engages a wealth of theoretical literature, from Immanuel Kant's anthropology, the topic of Foucault's second dissertation, to the writings of Foucault contemporaries like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida. Throughout, she also places Foucault in the context of the Marxist liberation movements of his time, especially in Tunisia and Iran.

Lazreg offers a sharply critical analysis of Foucault's stance toward non-European societies, albeit in a generous spirit. For example, she writes on the one hand that his "constant focus on cultural difference" (p. 252) results in a thorough misreading of the three societies in question -- Tunisia, Iran, and Japan -- while on the other hand, she informs the reader that she "does not characterize him as an Orientalist" (p. 8). This dialectic of critique and appreciation emerges most poignantly on the final page of the book, where her very high overall assessment -- and strong critique -- of Foucault's oeuvre becomes clear: "In the end, cultural otherness reveals that the greatest system of ideas of our time has a zone of shadow. It is Foucault's Achilles' heel" (p. 253). This is not, however, the familiar postcolonialist critique of a Western writer's assessment of the East: "This book also departs from postcolonial studies, which seek to document instances of orientalism. Instead, it focuses on the unintended consequences of an anti-humanist approach to culture" (p. 8). In short, Lazreg's book is an immanent critique in the best sense of the word.

As Foucault remarked in a conversation published in 1979 about the Iranian revolution, after having witnessed and written about the anti-

shah uprising: "They don't have the same regime of truth as ours" (reproduced in the appendix to Afary and Anderson 2005, p. 259). Although Lazreg does not cite them directly, these words could have formed the leitmotif of *Foucault's Orient*, which makes the case that he saw the Orient as outside Western reason. Whether in Tunisia, Iran, or Japan, Foucault tended to banish as inauthentic those aspects of the local intellectual discourse that grounded themselves in modern European thought -- Marxism, liberalism, etc. -- in favor of implicitly exoticist notions about the societies he was visiting.

*Foucault's Orient* begins with a fictive and seemingly chaotically ordered Chinese encyclopedia that Foucault evokes in 1966 to illustrate the otherness of Chinese culture, before moving to his 1961 preface to the original edition of *History and Madness*, where he tellingly compared Eastern alterity to the limit experience of madness. This persisted into his Iran writings, where he wrote with undue enthusiasm of Iranian Islamism as a type of revolt "against the global systems." In continuity with that 1961 preface, he also termed the Iranian uprising "insane,." which he clearly meant as praise. (See Afary and Anderson, p. 222). Citing some similar passages in his Iran writings, Lazreg asks what "justified the comparison with madness?" (p. 149). She concludes that he was reading Iran through the lens of his lifelong perception of the otherness of non-Western societies. Thus, while Iran "brought Foucault very close to reformulating his concepts," he nonetheless "fell short as he saw in the Iranian movement a vindication of his own work" (p. 149); moreover, in the tracks of Nietzsche, "Foucault frequently gives the impression of discussing a literary text rather than a sociopolitical event" in his Iran writings (p. 156n89).

Lazreg argues that Foucault's "essentializing [of] Iranian culture" around the theme of Shia Islam as foundational (p. 150) paralleled his equally essentialist -- but in a different direction -- insistence upon viewing modern Tunisia through its ancient Greco-Roman past, a "historical heterotopia through which Arab and Islamic history has evaporated" (p. 161). Here, Foucault seemed to see the retention of many elements of ancient Greco-Roman sexual practices: "His preoccupation with Greek sexual practices among Tunisian males may have blotted out other, more political concerns" (p. 178). Foucault developed these perceptions during a yearlong teaching stint in Tunisia, where he completed *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Although he quietly supported the radical Marxist students during the repression of their revolt of 1968, even allowing some of them to use his home for meetings, "Foucault did not take the Tunisian students' Marxism seriously. In fact, he found it amusing" (p. 178). For their part, some of these students regarded his Nietzscheanism as "right-wing" (p. 171),

very likely connected to the fact that he was "silent on the [French] colonial factor in Tunisia" (p. 175). In this sense, Foucault failed to engage his Tunisian interlocutors on their own terms.

Lazreg's two chapters on Foucault and Japan break entirely new ground, since to my knowledge there has been almost nothing published on this aspect of his life and work. Foucault's brief visits to Japan -- in 1970 and 1978, the latter only a few months before his two visits to Iran -- were for the purpose of giving lectures on his work. These visits also afforded him some contact with Japanese academics and Zen monks. Here, he confronted a non-Western society that had thoroughly modernized in a capitalist manner, something that did not fit very well his worldview. Lazreg concludes that in his writings and interviews on Japan and with Japanese, "Foucault could only stress Japan's cultural difference" (p. 233) and that therefore, "he missed the self-same in the Japanese Other" (p. 240).

Despite its generous and measured tone, *Foucault's Orient* offers in the end a devastating portrait of one of the most important thinkers of the last few decades, whose pioneering work on punishment and on sexuality continues to resonate.

But this book raises an important question left implicit by the author. Was Foucault's othering of the "Orient" a shadow that flickered across his brilliant and persuasive oeuvre, or did that shadow seriously undermine the importance of his work as a whole, even at its greatest? To this writer, it seems clear that we need to measure thinkers who attempt to describe the contours of modern society by a wide lens, one that includes their theorization (or lack thereof) not only of Western Europe and North America, but also the vast human world outside that sliver of humanity.

#### References:

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