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

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The Shia identity was politically mobilised during the Iranian Revolution. The fluid, more hybrid and layered aspects of this identity and its interpretations hardened to form a simple militant front. At the time, the revolution was applauded by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who as a journalist, ended up in Tehran. He was asked by the leading Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera to be a special correspondent reporting on the Iranian Revolution. He went to Iran in order to witness what he called “the birth of ideas” and the emergence of “spiritual politics”. Foucault wanted to gain inspiration from this revolution for ways to escape the grip of a cerebral, modern society that he had long criticised, with its ideology of the quantifiable, manageable and manipulable person. He hailed the revolution as a potential challenger to disciplinary modernism. With his leaning towards Oriental cultures, he was a supporter of the Islamists who sought to break away from the culture and politics of the modernist regime of the Shah.

The Islamists also criticised a purely materialistic view of life. The dualist positioning of nostalgic orientalism, which is informed by a preference for archaic social structures, and cold rational modernism was subsequently heavily criticised. This period was painstakingly covered. The failure of the revolution was an anti-climax for many. (7) As Altoussa H. responded to Foucault in 1978: “The Western left should not let itself be seduced by a cure that is perhaps worse than the disease”. (8)

The concept of spiritual politics is very alluring: a type of politics that issues from the very fibre of social relations and ways of life.