Introduction

This book examines the role played by the “Orient,” and non-Western cultures more generally, in Foucault’s critical scholarship. It attempts to shed light on the puzzling gap between Foucault’s powerful demystifying thought and his view of the Orient as an enigma beyond the grasp of Western reason. Foucault had a keen interest in non-Western countries. He lived in Tunisia in 1966–1968 and once considered moving to Japan, a country he visited twice, in 1970 and 1978. In defining his *reportage d’idées*, he expressed his commitment to exploring ideas produced “particularly among the minorities or people who historically have been bereft of the ability to speak or make themselves heard.”¹ He went to Iran as a journalist to discover some of these ideas. Yet in spite of his interest and travels, Foucault constructed Western reason in contradistinction to the Orient, as explained in his 1961 original preface to *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, in which he wrote: “the Orient is for the Occident everything that it is not”; it constitutes the “limit” of Western rationality.² The preface was removed from the 1964 French abridged edition. For decades, all foreign language translations (except for the Italian) were based on the abridged edition, and therefore did not contain the 1961 preface with the passage on the Orient.³ The revised 1972 edition, under the abridged title, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (*History of Madness*), contains a new and very brief preface without the passage on the Orient–Occident divide. It was not until 2006 that a translation of the 1972 version reproduced the 1961 preface in its entirety in the English language.⁴

The removal of the preface does not mean that Foucault had had second thoughts about the exclusion of the Orient from the Western *ratio*. On the contrary, the preface to *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*), published five years later, introduced the book with a citation from Borges about a fictitious Chinese encyclopedia. Discussing the encyclopedia as if it were real, Foucault analyzed a bizarre Chinese enumeration of dogs as reflecting the
peculiarities of Chinese culture and language as opposed to the scientific orderliness of Western culture. Foucault’s foregrounding of the discussion of the Chinese encyclopedia in the book transcends his penchant for provocative literary examples; it is also hardly attributable to what Georges Can- guilhem called Foucault’s espagnolisme or predilection for things Spanish. Indeed, the fiction in which The Order of Things found its inspiration is different from the works of literature such as those of Flaubert, or Robbe-Grillet, that he was prone to cite. Furthermore, the epistemic significance of the Chinese encyclopedia has not been fully explored, although, as chapter 1 indicates, a number of analysts have cited it but ignored its role in Foucault’s conception of the Orient.

At first glance, Foucault’s view of an insurmountable divide between East and West is baffling, as it appears to be at odds with his political outlook. Indeed, he had been a member of the French Communist Party, even if only for two years. He had taken positions usually associated with the Left on a range of issues such as the rights of immigrants, prisoners in Tunisia as well as France, psychiatric patients, and Polish insurgents against Soviet rule. In retrospect, however, a number of factors indirectly point to the compatibility of Foucault’s radical perspective on cultural otherness with his philosophical orientation: for instance, as a “specific intellectual,” he carefully picked and chose among the issues of his time rather than availing himself of a universal principle of justice, freedom, or democracy to guide his stance. In explaining Foucault’s understanding of his role as an intellectual, Bourdieu pointed out that Foucault wished to avoid being “the moral and political conscience, or the spokesman and entitled advocate (mandataire)”—a stance seen as typical of “the universal intellectual,” as Sartre was. Furthermore, Foucault was critical of the French Left, to some extent justifiably, attributing its failings to Marxism. Informed by the Communist Party’s initial support for Stalinism, his interpretation of Marx typically rested on an economic-deterministic viewpoint. Further, he was opposed to socialism in Europe as well as in the Third World societies, such as Vietnam, that had established socialist governments in the aftermath of wars of decolonization.

Whether in Tunisia, Iran, or Japan, Foucault never failed to mention Marx negatively. In Tunisia, he was astonished by the seriousness with which students, rebelling against Bourguiba’s dictatorship, took Marx’s ideas (which he had deemed obsolete), to the point of risking their lives. He also dismissed their knowledge of Marx. In Iran, he felt he had found a ringing refutation of Marx’s conception of religion. Ironically, when faced in Japan with the president of the Socialist Party, who was not keen on cooperating with French socialists, he appealed to the universalistic impetus behind Marx’s thought to exhort the president to change his mind. The significance of Foucault’s persistent opposition to Marx’s philosophical
orientation is frequently obscured by his ties to the Gauche Prolétarienne, a Maoist organization founded in 1969, which organized factory workers, considered France an occupied territory, and called for a general people’s uprising. Its charismatic leader, Pierre Victor, whose real name was Benny Lévy, ultimately renounced his politics and turned to Orthodox Judaism instead. Victor and Foucault held a long discussion on popular justice, published in Les Temps Modernes in 1972. Daniel Defert explained to me that he had been a militant of the Gauche Prolétarienne, as well as the initiator of the establishment of the Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons (GIP) to which he had asked Foucault to lend his name because of his notoriety. A consequence of Foucault’s opposition to Marx as well as of his on-and-off links to the Left was his embrace of the ideas of the new philosophe, André Glucksmann, as well as his intriguing appreciation of neoliberalism in the years before his death. However, although Foucault was hardly alone in his wholesale criticism of Marx’s thought, or his interest in neoliberalism, his dalliances with the Left, when considered together with his critical scholarship, give a surplus meaning to his conception of the Orient. It is not that adoption of historical materialism is a precondition to understanding cultural difference. Rather, opposition to Marx’s thought was one aspect of Foucault’s broader opposition to humanist philosophy in which Kant’s cosmopolitan anthropology plays an essential role. There is no doubt that Foucault’s critique of humanist philosophy and the social sciences it informs is valuable. Indeed, humanist philosophy frequently conflates the Western experience with the human experience; it also uses the Western experience as a standard against which to gauge other societies. Foucault’s opposition to humanism’s universalist claims does not necessarily mean that he could not have used Western rationality as a standard of reference in making sense of non-Western cultures. However, Foucault’s critique failed to decenter his own view of humanist philosophy. For experiencing other cultures necessarily brings the human being back to the forefront of understanding himself as a subject of culture.

It is against the backdrop of Foucault’s critique of Kant’s Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View early in his career that this book traces the rationale as well as the consequences of Foucault’s exclusion of the Orient from the Western ratio. It unravels the effects of this exclusion on his understanding of cultural difference as well as his encounters with non-Western cultures. Foucault’s Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology foreshadows the unresolvability of his cultural conundrum as initially expressed in Folie et déraison: although posited as the outer limit of the Western ratio, the Orient’s reason remains unfathomable, and glimpsed only as “different,” or “mysterious.” Hence what this outside reason actually is, how it relates to the sundered interior of Western reason, is left till the end of his life unexplored.
as if for fear it might reveal the operation of the very same reason Foucault analyzed so precisely from the inside.

Having argued against Kant’s *Anthropology*, did Foucault provide an alternative approach to understanding and explaining cultural difference-qua-Orient in terms other than as a limit-experience? Once Foucault dismissed humanist anthropology as an illusory attempt to understand “man,” a creature he assumed to have vanished with the death of God as announced by Nietzsche, could Foucault write or speak about the Orient while dispensing with anthropological assumptions? Parenthetically, Foucault tinkered at times with structuralist anthropology in his study of Western culture. Assuming the posture of the anthropologist, he wished to apply the ethnological method to the history of ideas, thus doing for Western culture what Claude Lévi-Strauss did for preliterate societies. Foucault’s ethnological-qua-archaeological posture may have served him well in understanding the history of ideas in Western culture. However, the Orient remained a puzzle as the method so construed when applied to live people and events in non-Western cultures proved to be an obstacle to the intersubjective character of cross-cultural interaction, a necessary condition for comprehending social meaning. Nevertheless, did he ultimately develop an anti- or nonhumanist anthropology? Could there be a nonhumanist anthropology? To what extent did Foucault’s view of the Orient as well as his experience of non-Western cultures, especially that of Japan, paradoxically reveal a version of the anthropology he had intended to go beyond? When in the “Orient,” how did he grapple with the human in the culturally different? In other words, did Foucault’s view and experience of the Orient–Occident “division” represent the limit(ation) of the anti-humanist and radical nominalist conception of cultural difference? The way in which Foucault expressed his experiences of non-Western cultures cannot be dismissed as mere travel impressions; they were indicative of the manner in which he thought of the Orient. From his perspective, any experience has a thought content. He argued that thought “can and must be analyzed in all the manners of speaking, acting, behaving in which the individual appears and acts as a subject of knowledge, ethics or law, as a subject conscious of himself and of others.”

Acknowledging the epistemic role of experience means also considering the interviews Foucault gave about his sojourns in Tunisia, Iran, and Japan as sources of meaningful information about his views of cultural otherness. Some of them were extensive and probed significant questions about Foucault’s work. Foucault’s interviews provide an opportunity to grasp in concrete terms what his philosophical-theoretical approach often kept abstract; they can hardly be dismissed as irrelevant to understanding his thought. Indeed, Foucault’s views of events were rarely ad hominem, but were informed by his philosophical orientation. For example, his pronouncements
on Japan were part of lectures as well as recorded interviews with major scholars. They cannot be ignored on the grounds that they were not part of his written corpus. Concerned about the distortions of meaning, especially in translation of interviews whose recordings are not available, as was the case in some instances in Japan, Daniel Defert cautions against the use of interviews in analyzing Foucault’s ideas. Raising a legitimate concern, he points out that interviews were generally oral and thus lacked the reflection and nuances that writing affords. The multiple translations to which some of the interviews were subjected should not diminish their documentary value, although allowance must be made for the translations’ distorting effects in analyzing them; this can be said of the translations of Foucault’s books too. In general, interviews helped to disseminate Foucault’s ideas and are a constitutive part of his legacy. Mindful of variations in translations, I cite to the French language texts of Foucault’s works and provide corresponding page references in English translations of those works whenever possible.

The book adopts a multidisciplinary approach combining the insights of sociology, especially content analysis, anthropology, as well as the history of ideas. In addition to examining Foucault’s written work and interviews he gave about his stays in Tunisia, Iran, and Japan, the book also analyzes supplemental interviews I carried out on his conception of the Orient. In Paris, France, interviews were held with Tunisian scholars who had known Foucault well in 1966–1968, or had been active in the social turmoil of 1967–1968. In Tunis, discussions were held with Zineb Ben Said Cherni, a philosopher who had attended Foucault’s philosophy course; Jélila Hafsia, former journalist and cultural host; Sadek Ben Mhenni, a former participant in the students’ revolt, as well as Lina Ben Mhenni, a leading figure in the movement that led to the 2011 Revolution. In Japan, meetings took place with several scholars and translators, specifically, Professors Moriaki Watanabe, who helped arrange Foucault’s 1970 trip and took part in his 1978 visit as well as introduced Foucault’s work to his country; Hidetaka Ishida, Yasuo Kobayashi, and Yasuyuki Shinkai, who translated, among other works, *Dits et écrits*; and the interpreter and organizer of Foucault’s 1978 trip, Christian Polak. Finally, an interview as well as phone discussions were held with Foucault’s longtime companion, Daniel Defert. Research took place over several years at the Foucault Archives of the IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine) at St. Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe, Caen, Normandy; the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Richelieu; as well as François Mitterrand sites; and the Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire Sorbonne. At IMEC, during the first trip, the archival journey began with listening to a number of Foucault’s recorded radio interviews and lectures given in Paris, Tunis, Tokyo, and Berkeley, among other places. Not having met Foucault in his lifetime, I intended to get a feel for the manner in which he lectured and
answered questions. More important, I wished to re-place his statements in their theoretical and methodological context as I searched for the location of non-Western cultures in his theorizing.

Foucault’s lifelong work was to lay bare the structure and functions of Western cultural knowledge as a way of studying how and why Western modernity in its manifold manifestations became what it is. However, he did not write a book or lecture on cultural difference at the Collège de France. Therefore, tracing the itinerary of his view of the Orient–Occident divide required placing him in conversation with himself, as well as with the people he met on his trips to non-Western countries. To place him in conversation with himself meant reading his work, at times symptomatically, in conjunction with interviews he gave to the media, his lectures, as well as his conferences. Foucault’s experience of non-Western cultures forms the empirical site within which his philosophical view of the Orient–Occident divide can be assessed in its temporal and spatial deployment. It provides the advantage of concretizing the meaning of the “empirico-transcendental doublet” he foregrounded in his critique of the “human sciences” in *The Order of Things*. In the world of cultural otherness in which Foucault flung himself, he was in a position to uncouple the “doublet” by suspending the “transcendental” (by which he meant the assumption of a universal human nature) and experimenting with a new way of making sense of cultural diversity. This book further seeks to determine whether he allowed his exposure to non-Western societies to transform his thought as well as methodological practice. What Foucault overlooked is the effect of his view of the Orient not only on the other side of Western rationality (which he left unexamined), but also on himself.

There are variations in tone and character in Foucault’s experience of non-Western cultures. Although diverse, the three countries under study have in common a moral geographical location in the Western map of the East (near and far); they also have in common cultural features traditionally interpreted as irremediably non-Western. In Tunisia Foucault mapped ancient Greece onto the local cultural present. Living in the (historical) heterotopia of the village of Sidi Bou Saïd, he missed the part of Tunisian culture that hid behind its French veneer. Tunisian culture formed a blank in Foucault’s imagination. In Iran, Foucault felt freer to explore the local culture by delving into the significance of Shi’i Islam to explain the resistance and risk taking the anti-shah protesters exhibited. In Japan, he experienced the palpable “limit” of the Orient–Occident divide. However, unlike Western philosophers before him, or social scientists who sought to rewrite Japanese thought and culture, he remained consistent with his schematic view of the Orient. Moreover, in Japan his experience compelled him to acknowledge that he needed to deepen his understanding of the culture. However, this
apparent effort to make “a history of this great divide,” which he hinted at in the preface to Folie et déraison, remained unfulfilled. Hence the “enigma” of Japanese culture was left unraveled.

The difficulties Foucault experienced in grasping the cultures of Japan, Tunisia, or Iran during his sojourns reflect his reluctance to overcome the epistemic divide he created between the West and the Orient. He consistently stressed cultural differences using Western culture, deemed uniform, as a standard of reference. This does not necessarily mean that he was convinced of a presumed superiority of Western culture. Rather, the West was a constant frame of reference and this iterated reference, when combined with what he said about non-Western cultures, calls into question his oft-asserted opposition to the universalist claims of humanist thought. If in Japan he expressed an unmitigated estrangement, in Iran, where he traveled after he had been in Japan, he strenuously attempted to bridge the divide between East and West conceptually. In defending his interpretation of the Iranian Revolution against his critics, he defined it as a special case of past protest movements in Europe, including the French Revolution, all of which were moved by a “political spirituality.” However, his idealist conception of Shi‘ism excluded considerations of social class (a fact Foucault acknowledged retrospectively), social inequality, and material needs at the roots of the Iranian movement and its evolution.21

Foucault’s forays into the Orient, near and far, may not have answered the Kantian question “What is Man?,” which he had once pondered. They nevertheless led him to revisit identifiers of Western specificity, such as “revolution” and “colonization.” They further enabled him to sharpen the relationship he had established between religion (whether Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism), the self, the body, and action. Paradoxically, of these identifiers, “colonization,” or the absence of it, emerges as the criterion of the limit as well as the mark of Western universalism. Foucault saw Japan, for example, as having escaped colonization but having the potential of “colonizing” Western thought. Hence, colonization remains the grid through which to assess the intellectual weight of a non-Western society. He could claim, for instance, that noncolonized Japan might be the crucible of a solution to the crisis of Western philosophy. Similarly, he viewed Iran, which avoided direct colonization, as a harbinger of new “spirituality movements” in the world. Ironically, colonization, a universal feature of Western rationality, does not make the culture of a formerly colonized country any more understandable than one that escaped colonization. This ambiguous stance sheds light on Foucault’s search for precolonial, purportedly well-preserved, Greek sexual practices of gay Tunisian men—a sign that Foucault was on a quest for re-experiencing Western cultural practices in a non-Western milieu. Language,
an important part of Foucault’s archaeological method, figures prominently in his categorization of the Orient as a “limit-experience.” Foucault spoke none of the native languages in the countries he lived in or visited. In Tunisia he communicated in French with the literate public of the university, but had no knowledge of Arabic, the language of the common person outside of Tunis. He did not speak Japanese and had to rely on interpreters as well as a small number of scholars who spoke French. Yet he did not discuss the role played by his lack of knowledge of Japanese in his feeling of estrangement in Japan. This is all the more intriguing given that Foucault keenly analyzed the sense of emotional isolation he experienced in Sweden as he found himself cut off from effective verbal communication with his entourage.22 Throughout, the language he used creates cultural unease. His frequent references to the possessive “our” (civilization or culture) and the personal pronouns “we” and “us” run as a leading thread through his work and encounters with his non-Western interlocutors. Their iteration, necessary in some circumstances, nevertheless has the effect of overburdening his discussions of (the Western) cultural difference. At times, it turns it into a symbolic bludgeon wielded against the reader, or a barrier to exploring the outer limit of the Western ratio.

Although it focuses on Foucault’s view of the Orient, this book does not characterize him as an orientalist. Claims that Foucault was an orientalist have been made before and there are indications in Foucault’s work that clearly support it.23 Foucault’s thought was contemporaneous with that of Edward Said, whose treatise on orientalism appeared the year Foucault was occupied with the Iranian Revolution.24 However, it is a peculiar consequence of Foucault’s view of cultural difference that he had no political, economic, or ideological investment in the East as defined by Edward Said.25 Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile Foucault’s stance before Tunisia’s youth rebellion of 1967–1968, or Iran’s upheaval with any such investment. Foucault was critical of Western culture, albeit very well ensconced in it, and ultimately unable to rise above it. Furthermore, he did not write books or essays on the “Orient.” This opens up a fruitful line of inquiry into his conception of the Orient focused on the nature and consistency of his epistemology, as well as the significance of his critique of the human sciences for cross-cultural understanding. In this sense, Foucault’s Orient is the other side of his definition of the Occident; it is one and the same thing. Indeed, minutely describing and analyzing the specificity of Occidental thought is a way of restricting the domain of its similarity with Oriental thought, and what’s more implicitly delegitimizing what is not the Occident. 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.
Introduction

The following chapters hew to an intellectual rather than a chronological order. Thus, the chapter on Tunisia, the first non-Western country in which Foucault lived, is placed after the chapter on Iran, the second country Foucault visited. This order of presentation is meant to highlight the atemporal character of Foucault’s cultural conundrum, thereby foregrounding its epistemic constancy. The chapters trace the sources and evolution of Foucault’s view of the “Orient” as articulated in his philosophical-theoretical orientation and expressed in his experiences of other cultures. The first chapter examines Foucault’s first cultural challenge: the analysis of Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia in the preface to *The Order of Things*. It identifies the manner in which Foucault’s treatment of Chinese culture frames his experiences of the cultures of Japan, Iran, and Tunisia. The second chapter locates Foucault’s philosophical understanding of difference/otherness within Western rationalism in his critique of René Descartes’s hyperbole of madness in his *Meditations of the First Philosophy*. Did Foucault’s critique of Cartesian rationalism address cultural difference of the kind he encountered in the “Orient?” The third chapter builds on the previous chapters to identify the anthropological implications of Foucault’s attitude toward cultural difference as mediated by his interpretation of Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. The fourth chapter asks whether there is an anthropology that informs Foucault’s view of the Orient. It compares Foucault’s critique of anthropology as mediated by the concepts of culture and race to anthropologists’ views of their discipline. The fifth chapter assesses the empirical challenge of the Iranian Revolution, which Foucault’s antihumanist orientation faced. It helps to determine whether Foucault had an alternative anthropology to existing empirical anthropology. It documents Foucault’s awareness of the limitations of his methodological approach, as well as his decision not to rethink his conception of cultural difference. The sixth chapter, devoted to Foucault’s two-year stay in Tunisia, points to Foucault’s silence on colonialism while he lived in the sheltered and idyllic community of Sidi Bou Said. What is the significance of Foucault’s search for traces of ancient Greece in Tunisia even as he witnessed a students’ revolt to which he provided some support? The seventh and eighth chapters focus on the place of Japanese culture in Foucault’s conception of cultural difference and the struggles he experienced in attempting to come to terms with it. Both chapters highlight the contradictions inherent in Foucault’s opposition to cosmopolitan anthropology yet reliance on anthropological assumptions.

A complicating factor in addressing Foucault’s view of the Orient is the existence of a trend, at times acquiring cultist features, that implicitly defines the outer limits of the discourse on Foucault, and to a large extent contains its criticism. This is no doubt an effect of the remarkable expansion of Foucault’s thought since he died in 1984. The exponential increase
in the dissemination of Foucault’s work was aided by the publication of *Dits et écrits,* as well as the lectures at the Collège de France in book form. It has further benefited from translations, films, and French intellectuals’ active promotion of Foucault’s legacy. The phenomenal currency of Foucault’s ideas is testimony to their richness and insightfulness. However, in the wake of this success orthodoxical practices set in, even though Foucault’s thought, often contradictory, ambiguous, and elusive, resists fixing. The following pages are a modest contribution to the task of examining what Foucault has left in the shadows. Their ambition is to open up a space in which a productive critical analysis of Foucault’s enduring legacy can occur.

On a final note, although this book refers mostly to anthropology, it does not exclude sociology. On the contrary, many of the issues and institutions Foucault analyzed, such as the clinic, the prison, mental illness, power, or the construction of knowledge, among others, are eminently sociological. Furthermore, in many instances, his analyses of these issues are similar to those availing in sociology. Hence, the focus on anthropology in this book is an imperative dictated by the subject matter rather than a deliberate choice, as Foucault considered this discipline the foundation of the human sciences.

NOTES


5. Georges Canguilhem, “Mort de l’homme ou épuisement du cogito,” *Critique* 242 (July 1967): 600. Canguilhem borrowed the term *espagnolisme* from Henri Brulard, and notes that for Stendhal it meant “hatred of preaching and platitudes,” which he believes captures Foucault’s “turn of mind.” Ibid. Canguilhem’s review article appears in translation as “The Death of Man or the Ex-

6. According to Macey, Foucault’s interest in (modernist) literature as expressed in references he made in his work as well as comments on literary figures appears to have become less pronounced after 1966, when he wrote a homage to Blanchot. David Macey, The Lives of Michel Foucault: A Biography (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 181.


9. Ibid., 243.


16. For example, the interview with Duccio Trombadori is an excellent text that clarifies Foucault’s views on a number of issues he had addressed in his books and travels. See Michel Foucault, Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori, trans. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

17. Defert worried about researchers giving more weight to interviews at the expense of Foucault’s books and lectures at the Collège de France. Defert, Interview, Paris, 2 June 2014.

18. Polak translated discussions Foucault had with bonzes at the Seionji Temple.

20. Tunisia does not escape the Orient categorization despite being strenuously presented by the media as virtually Western.


26. At a conference sponsored by CERI-Sciences Po, in Paris, in 13–14 January 2014, one panel decried the adulation of Foucault as well as the use of his concepts as contexts unto themselves.

27. Dits et écrits, edited by Daniel Defert and François Ewald with the collaboration of Jacques Lagrange, is a collection of the articles, reviews, and interviews, at home and abroad, that had been published when Foucault was still alive. In French it exists in a four-volume, or two-volume (quarto) format at Gallimard.


29. The acquisition in 2014 by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France of 37,000 pages of reading notes, lectures, and drafts of some of his books will further broaden interest in his work.