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**Joan Wallach Scott**, *Parité!: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. ix + 191 pp. Notes, index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-74107-9. \$22.00 U.S. (pb) ISBN 0-226-74108-7.

Review by Carolyn J. Dean, Brown University.

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Joan Scott's new book, *parité*, is an elegantly argued and ambitious effort to analyze and historicize the theoretical premises and political practices that shaped the most recent struggle for gender equality in France. The law on *parité*, passed on June 6, 2000, sought to achieve equal representation of men and women in elected political bodies and to this end mandated that half of all candidates for office (but not half of elected representatives) be women. A stunning achievement by feminists in the context of French republicanism, it applied to elections by *scrutin de liste* (proportional representation) and *scrutin majoritaire* (selection of single candidates by majority vote), and provided that lists of candidates be alternated by sex in elections to the Senate and the European Parliament. In all other elections in municipalities with populations over 3500, regional assemblies, and the Corsican assembly, three women had to be represented in each group of six candidates.

However, political parties on both the left and right weakened the law by the way they chose to apply it. Those names at the top of the list were those most likely to secure a seat or a position of leadership, and in most cases, parties placed men's names in the coveted higher spots. In majority elections, which require two rounds, Scott points out that "since there was no penalty for the final outcome of the elections, parties could simply designate female candidates for seats they knew they would lose" (p.128). The law, moreover, imposed only minor financial penalties on parties that violated it, and did not apply at all to cantonal elections that were conceived as the breeding ground for national elections. Scott concludes that women did not gain all that much in numbers, and gained most in elections by proportional representation. Over the course of various electoral contests since 2000, the law gave women greater access to the European parliament and municipal and regional councils, but ultimately did not open doors to far more powerful bodies like the National Assembly.

This book—to my knowledge the only in-depth scholarly study of the movement and its context in English—is far more, however, than a legal or political history of *parité* or an effort to trace the adventures of a concept. Instead, it focuses on the challenge *parité* poses to French universalism as it struggles to reinforce itself in the face of demands by particular and thus "different" groups for state recognition at the beginning of a new millennium. As in her much misunderstood *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (in which she describes and analyzes feminism's constitutive contradictions)[1], Scott does not only evaluate feminists' triumphs and failures. Nor does she or seek to explain the discrepancy between the *paritaristes'* radical goals and the law's ultimate limitations (this is not, as she notes, "a narrative account of the movement as a chapter in a self-contained women's history" [p. 6]). Instead, in *parité*, she analyzes how the movement, which exposed gender discrimination in politics and mobilized women to run for office, challenged the presumption that women, whose sexual difference had historically excluded them from incarnating an abstract and universal "idea of France"[2] even after they had won the suffrage in 1944, were unable symbolically to represent the nation. Scott demonstrates brilliantly how the theory and practice of *parité* was constituted within the historically specific and multiple discursive formations that both defined challenges to French cultural and political identity in a period of globalization and constituted the frameworks within which responses to them could be formulated. Thus, the book is about the myriad and

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unpredictable ways in which a revision of the very social signification of “woman” became thinkable in contradictory ways. Her often (but not exclusively) symptomatic reading of *parité* thus powerfully exposes the contradictions of French republicanism in order to challenge more traditional social science models of how social and political transformation occurs and how political subjects are constructed.

According to Scott, *parité* emerged the early 1990s in the context of a broader crisis of representation in France manifest in the estrangement of the political class from civil society. In reality, however, this estrangement was a displacement of another failure: that of the perceived fragmentation of civil society and the apparent failure of French strategies for integrating its substantial Muslim population, many of whom were dubbed “immigrants” even though they had been born in France of primarily, but not exclusively, Algerian, Tunisian, or Moroccan parents. French universalism derives from the French revolutionaries’ efforts to replace the old feudal order with formal political equality and is premised on the idea of an abstract individual, in contrast to American pluralism’s interplay of concrete individuals and collective groups with diverse interests who struggle to define the meaning of the nation. Thus affirmative action, which seeks to remedy exclusion, is an American liberal democratic strategy that identifies excluded groups and offers inclusion on the basis of a group’s difference. In France, however, the abstract individual represents the citizen and the nation, and his ability to be representative rests on the extent to which his particularities can be abstracted. Integration of those deemed different, and “immigrants” in particular, was thus not premised on the recognition of difference, but on the presumption that all citizens were individuals whose cultural differences—since total assimilation was no longer expected in this updated model of *intégration*—existed only as “private commitments” (p. 27). The discrepancy between this ideal and the reality of social exclusion was made dramatically manifest in the early 1990s as discontent increased among France’s Muslim population. It exploded in the 1989 *affaire du foulard*, in which three Muslim girls were expelled from school for wearing headscarves that purportedly constituted a violation of the legal separation of church and state.

Women had won the vote in 1944 and were no longer fighting for the right to be conceived, as were “immigrants,” as the political equals of Frenchmen. Yet they had never been conceived as adequate representatives of the nation because sexual difference could not be abstracted. Since the French Revolution, women’s biological and sexual “nature” had disqualified them from citizenship on the grounds that their difference ultimately rendered them disruptive forces in the public sphere, where they would inevitably substitute cunning for reason and seduction for persuasion. In the context of new challenges to French identity by minority populations and wider economic forces—in particular integration into a more broadly defined European economy and its consequences—the population in general became increasingly estranged from the political class who failed substantively to address these issues and this estrangement, in many ways, paved the way for women’s demands for equal representation. The political class increasingly resembled a corporate body rather than an assemblage of representative individuals. And the Socialists, who had suffered massive losses in 1993, used the issue of *parité* to present themselves as serious about reforming an ossified and unresponsive political system.

Scott argues that 1992 was *parité*’s founding moment and that Françoise Gaspard, Claude Sevrans-Schreiber, and Anne Le Gall’s *Au pouvoir citoyennes: Liberté, égalité, parité* was its founding text. The three authors were all political activists. Gaspard had been the socialist mayor of Dreux until 1983 and in the early 1990s was a member of the European Commission’s body of experts on “women and decision making” (p. 58); Sevrans-Schreiber was a journalist and the publisher of the French counterpart of the American *Ms. Magazine* in the 1980s; and Le Gall had a background in law. Gaspard, Sevrans-Schreiber, and Le Gall conceived *parité*, not in terms of American-style affirmative action, but in terms of what Scott calls “desymbolization” (p.54). Rather than argue that sexual difference derived meaning from women’s social location (that it was socially constructed or that women brought a set of different attributes to politics than men), these activists sought instead to render women abstract individuals by

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unsexing them: “They argued that sex was relevant for the definition of the abstract individual not as sexual difference, not as a set of culturally defined attributes, but rather as anatomical duality—the bare fact of genitally distinct bodies. Since all humans came in one of two sexes, and since sex had been used to disqualify women and to favor men, the way to equality was through the redefinition of the human individual as plural, as a type of two” (p. 61).

Intellectuals, journalists, and even other feminist activists consistently misinterpreted this novel effort to desymbolize sexual difference because of the difficulty of separating the “bare fact of distinct bodies” from the social meanings with which they had been attributed. The struggle over women’s political inclusion and therefore their ability to represent the nation in France would be a struggle between those who would fight for a more inclusive universalism in the form of a newly defined abstract individual (the desymbolization of sexual difference) and those who sought sexual equality by transforming the social meaning of “sexual difference” into a form of universalism. That is, many feminists, whose most influential representative was the philosopher Sylviane Agacinski, argued that sexual difference should guarantee, rather than disqualify women from representing the nation as abstract individuals. This rather surprising turn of events did not simply represent the inevitable misreading of the *paritaristes*’ theoretical premises, though it was that too. After all, regardless of the *paritaristes*’ efforts to make their arguments clear, other French commentators often believed that they advocated a “sexed” version of political participation in which women would bring special attributes to the table. Some staunch defenders of the republican tradition, such as Elisabeth Badinter, attacked the movement for abdicating universalism in favor of an argument about women’s “difference” as their qualification for political office. Indeed, it was this distortion of the original meaning of *parité* that was often invoked by politicians seeking to respond to popular enthusiasm for the concept of women’s political participation, especially in the context of popular suspicion of the political class. In so doing, they sustained women’s sexual difference in the face of a challenge to their power and thus sought to control the terms on which women’s political inclusion would be defined.

But it was the 1999 debate over the *PaCS* (*Pacte Civil de Solidarité*)—over whether or not to offer unmarried couples the same rights as married ones—that provided the context within which sexual difference became the grounds for women’s inclusion in rather than exclusion from French politics. In response to demands by gays and lesbians that the benefits and privileges accorded to married couples be accorded to them, many politicians, intellectuals, and advocates of *parité* defended the centrality of heterosexuality to the survival of the State. Homosexuality was a “private commitment” with no discernable symbolic value, while heterosexuality was embedded in a fundamental, pre-political law of sexual difference that made social reproduction possible. There were all sorts of arguments by “experts” testifying to the symbolic importance of sexual difference as embodied by the heterosexual *couple*—this wasn’t, from their point of view, a matter of religious belief or of discrimination against gays and lesbians. Instead, it was the simple recognition that the social meaning of sexual difference was foundational to social order. As Scott argues, “if sexual difference as embodied in the couple were foundational, why not insist that it be reflected as such in representative bodies, the elected assemblies that were the expression of the nation?” (p. 115). “This is,” she goes on, “exactly what Sylviane Agacinski did, building on the reasoning used to justify unequal treatment of homosexuals in regard to family formation in the PaCS to argue for equal treatment of women through passage of a law on *parité*” (p. 115). In this sense, Agacinski sought to “sex” the political body, whereas the original *paritaristes* sought to “unsex” it. The grounds of *parité*, that is, would not be the desymbolization of sexual difference, but the newly charged symbolism of the perfectly complementary heterosexual couple whose “difference” should be reflected in the equal representation of women and men in the nation’s elected bodies. It was Agacinski whose name was to be most closely associated with *parité*, partly due to her “feminist” (and anxiety-ridden) defense of normative heterosexuality and partly because she was married to Lionel Jospin, the sitting Prime Minister.

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This is not the end of the story. To return to the question about whether or not gender discrimination can be rectified within the terms of “traditional” French republicanism, the answer is not simply yes or no. Scott’s work demonstrates how the question, when posed by the *paritaristes*, generated multiple mutations in the social meaning of sexual difference (and thus of “traditional” republicanism). Clearly the difficulty of uncoupling sex from its social meanings renders the desymbolization of sexual difference a thinkable, but distant goal. At the same time, Scott’s shrewd analysis of the obstacles to gender equity in France is matched only by her optimism about the possibilities intrinsic in a history that always exceeds the (political, rhetorical, and social) terms that appear to constrain it. I would ask only for one point of clarification: it is clear from Scott’s account that sexual difference can be a metonym of other differences. How, more precisely, might the concept of *parité* be thought in reference to other multiply “different” groups such as Muslim women and lesbians? To ask this question, however, is already to acknowledge that Scott’s history of *parité* expands the parameters of the conventional historiographical questions she addresses by asking how the subject of political representation is constructed in and through these “differences” in the first place: How does French universalism both constrain and enable new forms of democratic citizenship? How do struggles over gender equality help us measure the impact of European integration and globalization on national self-representation? How do challenges to gender discrimination expose the myth of a unitary and invisible French republic that absorbs all (ethnic, class, sexual, religious) differences? *Parité!* is an important contribution not only to the history of French feminism and French republicanism, but to the theory of history.

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#### NOTES

[1] Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminism and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[2] Pierre Birnbaum, *The Idea of France*, trans. M.B. De Bevoise (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001).

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