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Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. xiii + 240 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.95 (cl). ISBN 9780691160641.

Review by Laura L. Frader, Northeastern University.

The idea of a secularism has long been invoked to proclaim the fundamental incompatibility of a superior Christian, Western civilization with the East, nowhere more blatantly than in Samuel Huntington's proclamation of a "clash of civilizations" and in the Islamophobia that it has authorized. Yet, as Joan Scott argues in this finely crafted, well-argued, wide-ranging, and timely book, secularism has never been a set of abstract truths, but has rather been a historically produced, discursive operation of power based on sexual difference. Gender has been a central feature of how secularism has been defined in relation to its opposites (in particular, in relation to Islam). Scott's aim is to "engage and discredit...the current representation of secularism as the guarantor of equality between women and men," and to show how secularism has developed historically on the basis of sexual difference and sexual inequality (p. 7). In this she succeeds with an argument that is careful, clear, and convincing.

*Sex and Secularism* is not strictly a book about France, although as Scott notes in her introduction, the impulse to write this book came following her 2007 *The Politics of the Veil* which examined the important place of gender difference in the French headscarf controversy and the resulting law banning the wearing of religious symbols (the headscarf prominent among them) in public schools.[1] Given how France has figured prominently in the development of Western secular ideas since the 1789 Revolution, Scott's examination of the links between gender, sex, and secularism will certainly shape how scholars of modern France think about the relevance of that legacy as it has developed historically for ongoing contemporary debates about immigration and Islam in the West. And what will be of interest to French historians is how secularism (which some might argue found its most effective articulations in France) developed on the basis of ideas about the relationship of gender difference to religion, economic rights, and political rights that traveled across national borders.

Relying on the work of historians, philosophers, literary scholars, anthropologists and sociologists among others, Scott traces the genealogy of secularism to demonstrate how, in the context of democratic revolutions and European imperialism, the reinforcement of gender difference became part of the logic of modernity and of the modern state. Thus, in the United States, Britain, and continental Europe, the development of secularism made women, allegedly more emotional and irrational than men, irrevocably associated with religion and situated

women as the repositories of morality and as “the guardians of social cohesion and stability” (p. 33). French male revolutionaries established the citizen as an independent, rational, “rights-bearing male” in contrast to women, whom they associated with irrationality and religion, views that persisted into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Repeatedly, the acknowledgment of women’s religious inclinations worked to establish the masculine foundations of republican governments. But as French republican anti-clerical historian Jules Michelet (writing in the 1860s) believed, women’s inherent religiosity constituted a danger to the republic; the task for men was to lure women away from their attachment to the church. Such views of gender difference and their social and political consequences constituted the very core of secularism. Moreover, they were not confined to France but could be found in societies as disparate as the early American Republic and the late nineteenth century modernizing Ottoman Empire as well. There, in transforming Shari’a law, Ottoman jurists associated women with tradition and the family and placed them under the jurisdiction of family law, whereas men became associated with modernity and public activity and came under the jurisdiction of contract law. These new legal statuses persisted in modern legal systems in former Ottoman states, long after the disintegration of the Empire.

A similar set of assumptions informed beliefs about fundamental distinctions between the sexes and the gendered division between public and private to which these beliefs led. These ideas received new emphasis in the development of Western secular states in the nineteenth century and were imprinted with the authority of scientists and social scientists. British and American doctors identified gender difference as the product of the brain in men and the reproductive organs in women. Brain size became the key to rationality and intelligence, and not only distinguished men and women, but also distinguished civilized white men from uncivilized black and brown colonial subjects. As for sex and reproduction, for a wide range of thinkers from Portalis and Fichte to Engels, Darwin, Frédéric Le Play and the nineteenth-century French political economists, marriage and the family constituted the indispensable underpinning of emerging nation states. Indeed, “gendered division of labor...defined secularism” and the management of private life constituted a means of insuring social order (p. 88).

Reprising an argument that she has developed more extensively elsewhere, Scott points to how sex and the repeated historical reinstatement of sexual difference became the basis on which women were excluded from full citizenship rights.<sup>[2]</sup> The language of French revolutionaries who excluded women from political participation in 1793 was clear: women naturally belonged in the private sphere; their natural difference from men was the very foundation of the political and social order. Such differences only intensified, argues Scott, with the emergence of secular modernity. The social contract was indeed a sexual contract.<sup>[3]</sup> Scott shows how the emergence of modern nations was accompanied by an effort to define and police gender roles and sexual activity and to reinforce gender asymmetry. Providing examples from the US, France, Turkey, and Iraq, she shows how the creation of new nations both resulted in new rights for women to education, professional advancement, and to political agency, but simultaneously preserved gender asymmetry in private life. Scott does not ignore feminist challenges to these conditions but argues that the views of male political leaders proved normative in modern secular states. Sexual difference lay at the core of secular political modernity.

In the post-World War II era, political leaders once more invoked Christian values as the underpinnings of secular democracies as Christian democratic parties achieved political prominence and leadership. The issue of religious freedom, in particular, became part of Cold War polemics and a repressive Soviet Union was cast as the antithesis of Western democracy, which upheld “the rights of private religious conscience” (p. 122). Sexual freedom and the status of women also became Cold War battlegrounds, leading secular democracies to reinforce emphasis on the family, maternity, and democracy, but now with a new focus on conjugal satisfaction and pleasure. This provided more ammunition for contrast with women in the USSR, whose roles as doctors, professors, and workers were touted by Soviet leaders as a mark of women’s equality with men, but who Western critics depicted as unfeminine workhorses. In the West, civil society appeals for equal pay, ending gender segregation in the labor market, and reproductive choice acquired more public attention than ever as did appeals for women’s sexual freedom and the gradual legalization of contraception and abortion in the 1970s. Sexual freedom, along with a new language of rights became evidence of the superiority of Western secular democracies, although as Scott notes, the notion of “sexual rights” troubled many who feared the displacement of economic, social, and political rights.

As the Cold War came to an end with the collapse of Communism, campaigns against violence against women further contributed to the claim of Western liberal secularism’s superiority. Western political thinkers and leaders freely deployed these ideas in their critiques of Islam. Conservatives mobilized assertions of Western women’s sexual freedom and freedom from violence to justify their intolerance of Islam. As Scott argued in *The Politics of the Veil*,<sup>[3]</sup> such ideas became particularly important in the French debate over the wearing of the headscarf, which critics decried as a form of enslavement, ignoring how the headscarf offers “an alternative repertoire for self-fashioning and self-restraint.”<sup>[4]</sup> These ideas are still very much alive. In a recent interview Bernard Henry-Levy, a long-standing critic of Islam, could still insist, “all the women who wear the veil accept the idea or are forced to accept the idea that they are not the equal of men, that there is something un-pure in their hair, in their freedom, in the grace of the way they move, which is only reserved to women and which is not the case for the man... If we had accepted the veil, it would have been as if we, the French Republic, led them to their destiny. The ban of the veil was an extended hand to this part of Muslim society that wants to embrace secular values.”<sup>[5]</sup> And these ideas are hardly confined to France, they have also appeared in Eastern Europe, as Poles and Hungarians confront immigration. Indeed, as Scott argues, “The twenty first-century discourse of secularism rests on an opposition between the West and Islam articulated in terms of a combat between uncovered and covered women’s bodies” (p. 158).

Historians of women and gender—especially those who study France—will be only too familiar with the arguments of political thinkers and leaders about sexual difference as the justification of economic and political inequalities that Scott discusses in the first part of the book. Yet what is critical to Scott’s argument is that these ideas not only deprived women of political voice and economic opportunities, but that they also underwrote the very development of secularism and authorized the political discourses that justify hostility to those who are deemed less “enlightened.” As Scott demonstrates in the second part of the book, the equation of sexual emancipation with gender equality created another stick with which to beat those whom secularists have defined as sexually repressed.

Where does all this lead? As Scott reminds us, “secularism is not an eternal set of principles, but a polemical term put to work differently in different contexts” (p. 183). And as her careful genealogy also reminds us, in secular discourse, gender and sexuality can be deployed in the service of goals that are frankly damaging to gender equality. Recently, white supremacists in France and elsewhere have taken on board the “replacement theory” of right-wing French writer Roland Camus, among others, who claims that Muslims and non-white immigrants are threatening to replace the white population. In a throwback to the French revolutionaries who glorified women’s domestic “vocation,” and the French pro-natalists of the 1920s and 1930s who argued that women should leave the workforce to devote themselves to bearing and rearing children, they argue that white women hold the key to the replenishment of the race. “Replacement theory” is, of course, built on the assumption of the superiority of white (secular) civilization locked in mortal combat with non-whites in yet another “clash of civilizations.” Here it is not women’s alleged equality that is held up as superior to the inequality of “others,” but women’s duty to maintain the superior race at all costs. It is a fundamentalist ideology that, as journalist Nellie Bowles rightly claims, requires the subjugation of women.[6] And it leads us to recall Scott’s important point that the Western secular preoccupation with the “unfreedom” of Muslim women has diverted attention from the persistent inequalities of gender, and violence towards women (as well as towards gays and lesbians), in our own backyard. This is a point which we would do well to take seriously as we search “for more just and egalitarian futures” (p. 183).

#### NOTES

[1] Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2] Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[3] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

[4] Nilüfer Göle, “Manifestations of the Religious-Secular Divide: Self-State and the Public Sphere,” in Cady Linell and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, eds., *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 49; cited by Scott, 165.

[5] Isaac Chotiner, Interview with Bernard Henry-Levy on “The Rights of Women and the Rights of the Accused,” *The New Yorker* March 18, 2019, [https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/bernard-henri-levy-on-the-rights-of-women-and-of-the-accused?utm\\_campaign=aud-dev&utm\\_source=nl&utm\\_brand=tny&utm\\_mailing=TNY\\_Daily\\_031819&utm\\_medium=email&bxid=5be9f4ab3f92a404692f8687&user\\_id=38320623&esrc=&utm\\_term=TNY\\_Daily](https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/bernard-henri-levy-on-the-rights-of-women-and-of-the-accused?utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mailing=TNY_Daily_031819&utm_medium=email&bxid=5be9f4ab3f92a404692f8687&user_id=38320623&esrc=&utm_term=TNY_Daily)

[6] Nellie Bowles, “‘Replacement theory,’ a Racist, Sexist Doctrine, Spreads in Far-Right Circles,” *The New York Times* March 19, 2019.

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