

## Joan W. Scott's Critical History of Inequality

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**For more than thirty years, Joan Scott has been informing and transforming both our history and the way we write history, while encouraging us to question categories and change our modes of thinking. From class struggle to sex differentiation, sexual emancipation and race, she proposes a critical analysis of Republican rhetoric to undermine naturalized forms of inequality.**

“Critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination.”<sup>1</sup> Epigraph to her essay “History-writing as Critique,”<sup>2</sup> this quote from Michel Foucault is the key to understanding the epistemological journey of the American historian Joan W. Scott. Professor Emerita at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, Scott is the author of numerous works on gender, feminism, and citizenship. A prolific and dynamic scholar, she has gone from studying social history to studying the history of women and then, in the 1980s, to studying the history of gender, becoming one of the first theorists in the field. With each shift in her historiographical focus, Scott has found the material needed to fuel her critical thought and shed light on the blind spots of social systems from the time of the French Revolution until the present day. Always on the lookout for history’s paradoxes, she has spent her entire career combatting the naturalization of differences and inequalities that stem from these contradictions.

As a historian and critical feminist, she has called for the concepts used in the social sciences to remain categories of critical intervention within political and academic debates. That’s why, from her seminal article “Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis,” published in 1986, to the recent publication in France of her book *De l’utilité du genre* in 2012, Scott has continued to highlight the political, social, and even imaginary issues that can only be understood through the conceptualization of sexual difference. To that end, she has zeroed in on French republican universalism, making it her preferred field of research, and has regularly weighed in on the public discussions surrounding its paradoxes. The politicization of sexual issues in France during the 1990s and the debates surrounding *parité*, domestic partnerships, and the wearing of Islamic headscarves have allowed her to reflect upon and discuss the reformulation of the republican contract by using real-life examples.

Now that “gender theory” has fallen under attack in France, denounced by its critics as an ideology that destroys the natural order and upsets the political and social balance, it seems fitting, if not crucial, that we take a look back on the ever-changing thoughts of a historian who has contributed greatly to the introduction of the concept of gender within the field of historiography.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is Critique?” *The Politics of Truth* (Semiotext(e), 2007), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Joan W. Scott, “History-writing as Critique,” *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (Routledge, 2007), 19–38.

**“Aspiring to be Clio, we became a subversive version of her.”<sup>3</sup>**

The definition of identity has long been the common thread in Scott’s numerous scholarly projects. Indeed, it was a dissertation on the social and political organization of glassmakers in Carmaux (in Southern France) in the late nineteenth century that earned her a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1969. Fascinated by the lengthy strike that these glassmakers organized in 1895, she seized upon the event to analyze the process by which this social group acquired a consciousness of class and asserted itself politically.<sup>4</sup> By situating the strike within a larger economic and social history, she pointed out that the unionization and the mobilization of the glassmakers occurred only on an intermittent and limited basis as a reaction to the mechanization of their trade. Building upon the concepts of new social history put forward by British historians E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, who sought to understand the creation and experience of the working class, Scott observed that neither the political action of the workers nor their class consciousness constituted a natural and automatic given: they were “the product of struggle and debate.”<sup>5</sup> For Scott, the notion of struggle and debate guards against deterministic and essentialist approaches, thereby allowing for an appreciation of the complexity of individual and collective identities in the history of the working class. Scott’s stance in the field of social history offers a permanent challenge to its foundations and its traditions. From her earliest research, Scott sowed doubt about history’s certainties, a practice that she would later define as a permanent fight waged against orthodox knowledge and its routine uses.

This challenge to the blind spots of historical epistemology is reflected in Scott’s active participation in American academic feminism. Hired at a time when academic feminism was bursting onto the campus scene, she found unprecedented creative potential for historical research in the political issues of feminist epistemology. In 1975, while an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Scott and her colleague Louise Tilly tackled an issue long neglected in the history of the working class: women’s labor. It was around then that the very first Women’s Studies departments were being established in the United States, and the pair belonged to a generation of female scholars who attempted to answer the call of the American feminist movement by seeking an end to the invisibility and marginalization of women on the historical stage. Through their study of women’s wage labor, Scott and Tilly did not simply intend to show that women have always worked; they backed up their claims regarding the asymmetric and gendered dimension of the labor market as well.

“Feminist history was never primarily concerned with documenting the experiences of women in the past, even if that was the most visible means by which we pursued our objective,” Scott reminds us. “The point of looking to the past was to destabilize the present, to challenge patriarchal institutions and ways of thinking that legitimated themselves as natural.”<sup>6</sup> *Women, Work, and Family* was first published in 1978. Through a statistical and social analysis of three economically different towns in France and England over time, the authors present a history of female labor in the face of changes brought about by industrialization. Their examination of the interplay between the economic sphere and the familial sphere allowed them to shed light on a central problem of feminism: despite

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<sup>3</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Feminism’s History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 16 (Summer 2004): 12.

<sup>4</sup> Joan W. Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-century City* (Harvard University Press, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (Columbia University Press, 1999), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Feminism’s History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 16 (Summer 2004): 21.

newfound access to wage labor, women remained in a subordinate social position due to the sex-based division of labor. The authors pay close attention to the various aspects of the female worker who is at the same time a wife, a mother, and a pillar of family life. These overlapping identities, converging in the identification of women with the family unit, explain why their economic practices were also subordinated to the needs of the family.

Scott felt that she had reached an impasse when she had finished her work on this project. A focus on economics and family dynamics seemed too limited to grasp the historical persistence of male-female inequalities and even more so to understand the emphasis on the natural, biological, and cultural differences of sex. The future of women's history, she thought, lay in a new historical method better able to respond to these questions. She articulated these thoughts at the 1980 annual meeting of the American Historical Association where she delivered an especially critical assessment of women's history in the United States. Women's history, she argued, had not realized its ambition to transform the practice of history simply by paying attention to women. Examining the social position of women as a function either of economics or ideology produces unsurprising historical narratives in which the exclusion of women becomes the automatic product of capitalism and/or patriarchy. Instead, Scott maintained, what was needed was a broader sense of how ideas about the natural differences of sex were used to put in place and justify relations of power.

Scott was particularly attuned to the critical voices that were proposing analyses exceeding the conceptual limits of the category "woman." Chief among these were the anthropologist and activist Gayle Rubin and the historian Natalie Zemon Davis.<sup>7</sup> In her pathbreaking article "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," published in 1975, Rubin sought to deconstruct the apparent naturalness of heterosexuality. Davis, on the other hand, offered a relational study of the sexes and sexual identities that was first printed in a 1976 issue of the journal *Feminist Studies*. But while the challenges of conceptualizing the notion of gender were already being spelled out, Scott lacked the theoretical tools that would enable her to challenge the conventional frameworks of historical analysis.

### **"Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis"**

The epistemological breakthrough came shortly thereafter, when Scott, now a professor at Brown University, joined a reading group with feminist literary scholars who were employing the tools of poststructuralism. The arrival of French theory—Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault—on American campuses offered Scott a radical change of perspective on history and its methodology as well as the practical means to achieve the conscious break that she had called for at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 1980. By calling the "obvious" categories of historical and political debate into question, these philosophers sought to shed light on the normative systems on which they are based.<sup>8</sup> For Scott, their work was an invitation to historicize all categories. From her perspective, it was not just a question of analyzing the place of women and men in history, but of deconstructing the very categories of "man" and "woman," which structure society in a binary and unequal system. It would be from then on possible to think of domination in other ways, rather than through objective structures like work or family, which organize domination and reproduce it.

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<sup>7</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210; Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Spring–Summer 1976): 83–103.

<sup>8</sup> François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (La Découverte, 2003).

Scott's "'L'ouvrière! Mot impie, sordide...': Women Workers in the Discourse of French Political Economy, 1840–1860," a chapter in her 1988 book *Gender and the Politics of History*, is the end result of this shift toward emphasizing the analysis of discursive structures.<sup>9</sup> In it, she examines how, in the nineteenth century, the essentialization of female functions that were seen as being naturally domestic and maternal and the stigmatization of young, single, working women who deviated from this private and conjugal model contributed to the invisibility and the inferiority of women in the labor market. Scott's new scholarship thus picked up where her work with Tilly had left off. The question of the construction of gender relations and the feminine and masculine categories are restated in terms of discursive constructions. Her former collaborator criticized this deconstructionist methodology as "literary and philosophical," as exceeding the boundaries of the discipline of history, and as ultimately eschewing class relations in order to attribute everything to gender relations alone.<sup>10</sup>

A central concept of "the feminist enterprise to denaturalize sex,"<sup>11</sup> gender first entered the lexicon of English-speaking social scientists in the 1970s with the publication of the book *Sex, Gender, and Society* by British sociologist Ann Oakley.<sup>12</sup> She was one of the first scholars to draw a distinction between biological sex and sociocultural gender. Gender is defined as being a social and cultural construct. In her milestone 1986 article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Scott incorporates this definition into a larger theory of domination.<sup>13</sup> Establishing a critical genealogy of gender practices in the humanities and social sciences, she highlights the evolutions, contributions, and limitations of the concept. Noting the failure of existing theories to explain the persistence of inequalities between women and men, she proposes a new conceptualization of the term situated at the crossroads of feminist humanities and poststructuralist theories. Thus, gender is not only "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes," but it is also "a primary way of signifying relationships of power," a field of norms and practices within which or through which power is articulated.<sup>14</sup> Scott's two-part definition therefore offers an alternative to sociological analyses of sexual social relations, which, despite allowing for the possibility to examine the unequal social structures between the sexes, fails to question the very conceptualization of that difference.

Scott explored avenues opened by Denise Riley in her 1988 book "*Am I That Name?*" which, by cataloguing the variations in meaning bestowed on the category "woman" throughout history, ultimately invites us not to consider the identity of the group "women" as a starting point of feminist thought, but as a "site of contest."<sup>15</sup> Gender produces meaning, structuring both the concrete and the symbolic perception and organization of all social life. Consequently, Scott proposes to question the use of categories as obvious as "women" and "men," "feminine" and "masculine" in the production of historical narrative. Gender assignments, because they refer to "nature," legitimate not only the hierarchies between men and women, but also other social hierarchies associated with relationships of class, race, or

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<sup>9</sup> Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (Columbia University Press, 1999), 139–167.

<sup>10</sup> Louise A. Tilly, "Gender, Women's History, and Social History," *Social Science History* 13 (1989): 451–53.

<sup>11</sup> Éric Fassin, "L'Empire du genre," *Le sexe politique: genre et sexualité au miroir transatlantique* (Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2009), 376.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender, and Society* (Maurice Temple Smith, Ltd., 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (December 1986): 1053–75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1067–69.

<sup>15</sup> Denise Riley, "*Am I That Name?*": *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

sexuality. The feminization of the colonized individual or the worker to justify his or her domination, the masculinization of the militant feminist in order to convey her transgression are discursive processes that allow us to grasp in a situated fashion how “politics constructs gender and how gender constructs politics.”

The translation of this article into French was instrumental in introducing the analytic concept of gender into France at a time when feminist studies were still struggling to be accepted by the academy.<sup>16</sup> Scott’s conceptualization marked a qualitative and decisive leap forward within the humanities, particularly within the field of history. While there was resistance to an analytic framework that focused primarily on speech and symbols at the expense of material structures of domination, and while many were reluctant to accept a formulation of the concept of gender that was seemingly more neutral than the “social relations between the sexes” or the “difference between the sexes,” the analytic categories and definitions used by most French female scholars at the time nevertheless shared a number of points in common with those proposed by Scott. Christine Delphy, for instance, one of the main theorists of materialist feminism, developed a nearly simultaneous alternative understanding of gender, defining the concept as a social relationship which divides the two sexes into antagonistic “classes.”<sup>17</sup> Far from signaling problematic disagreement within the field of women’s studies, these tensions in the formulation and conceptualization of gender were for Scott representative of the true purpose of feminist questioning. Its “continuing appeal” lay in “its refusal to accommodate the status quo.”<sup>18</sup>

Scott, however, had yet to finish destabilizing the history of women and gender. In recent times, psychoanalysis has played a prominent role in her thinking. She has been especially interested in the concept of fantasy, using it to build on Freud’s theories of identity formation. By highlighting the complexities and elemental tensions at play as each individual goes through the process of identifying as male or female, psychoanalysis turns masculinity and femininity into an ongoing chaotic and contingent problem. Scott sees in psychoanalysis the chance to examine the imaginaries and the desires at work in the construction of feminist movements and their political identity. With the notion of “fantasy echo,” which she defines as the echoing throughout history of fantasies of “empathetic identification,” she seeks to identify the unconscious logics at work in the construction of the category “woman” as a “commonality” of feminism.<sup>19</sup> In the wake of philosopher Judith Butler, Scott views the history of gender as an object of anxiety, uncertainty, and disagreement in order to trace the constant efforts to hold in place the inevitably shifting boundaries between men and women that pervade society.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Genre: Une catégorie utile d’analyse historique,” trans. Eleni Varikas, *Cahiers du GRIF*, 37–38 (1988): 125–53. The same year, the women’s history group at the Centre de Recherches Historiques (Center for Historical Research) produced a theoretical paper discussing a more interpretative history and the reintroduction of the political dimension in thoughts surrounding masculine and feminine. Danièle Voldman, Pierrette Pézerat, Yannick Ripa, Pauline Schmitt-Pantel, Geneviève Fraisse, Rose-Marie Lagrave, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Cécile Dauphin, Arlette Farge, and Michelle Perrot, “Culture et pouvoir des femmes: essai d’historiographie,” *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 41, (1986): 271–93.

<sup>17</sup> Her articles from the early 1990s have since been republished in two volumes, Christine Delphy, *L’ennemi principal* (Éditions Syllepse, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Millennial Fantasies: The Future of Gender in the 21st Century,” *Gender: Die Tücken einer Kategorie*. Joan W. Scott, *Geschichte und Politik—Beiträge zum Symposium anlässlich der Verleihung des Hans-Sigrist-Preises 1999 der Universität Bern an Joan W. Scott*, ed. Claudia Honegger and Caroline Arni (Chronos Verlag, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Winter 2001): 284–304.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2007).

### Critical Feminism's Challenge to Republican Universalism

In the wake of Foucault, Scott called for the writing of a history that would operate to reveal the implicit and yet structuring norms underpinning our social and political certitudes by challenging the categories of difference. While gender has long been her preferred starting point, Scott has also invoked race, class, nationality, and sexuality in her works in order to chart hierarchies of domination. With this in mind, she made it her aim to shed light on the paradoxes of universality promoted by French republicanism. From the late 1990s to the late 2000s, from *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* to *Parité: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* to *The Politics of the Veil*, Scott's work has offered a critical analysis of how the French republican model has, in the name of universalism, marginalized feminist demands as well as those of sexual and racial minorities. In her 1998 book *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Scott uncovers and analyzes the paradox which has structured the history of feminism in France since the time of the French Revolution. This paradox is the result of two contradictory universalisms that coexist within republican discourse: abstract individualism and the universalism of sexual difference. The discursive practices which gave rise to republican universalism during the French Revolution were at the same time accompanied by references to the "natural" differences between the sexes in order to justify the exclusion of women from political citizenship. The universalism of sexual difference thus won out, prevailing over the universalism of abstract individualism and, in doing so, helped to bring about feminism and its paradoxical position within the political sphere. Scott reads the history of feminism differently and envisages it in terms of "discursive processes . . . that produce political subjects, that make agency . . . possible."<sup>21</sup> She shows how the paradox of feminism lies in this dual republican discourse that forces these political subjects to fight as women—and therefore to organize into a feminist movement—for the right not to be regarded as women—and therefore to obtain the same rights as men.

In *Parité: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism*, which was published in 2005, Scott shifts her attention to the modern day, reflecting on the difficult relationship between the universality of human rights and the universality of sexual difference. A new chapter in her history of French feminism, *Parité* studies how the notion of equality has been used within the broader context of a crisis of political representation initiated by the issue of immigrant voting rights in the 1980s, then in the debate surrounding the recognition of gay couples' domestic partnership rights, commonly designated as *PaCS*, *Pacte civil de solidarité*, in French. She develops a detailed analysis of the theoretical arguments put forth in favor of *parité* as well as of the debates surrounding this demand. According to her, the reconceptualization by theorists of *parité* of the abstract individual as sexed—man or woman—was an attempt to reformulate universalism and offer a possible answer to the "dilemma of difference."

Racialization, class, and sexuality are likewise determinations of the individual that republican universalism pretends to ignore or repress. In *The Politics of the Veil*, one of the few books written by Scott that has not been translated into French, she addresses the issue of discrimination experienced by people with immigrant backgrounds in France in light of a 2004 law banning the wearing of "conspicuous" religious symbols in French schools. She highlights how the debates surrounding the headscarf are framed in both racial and sexual terms. Although theoretically a discussion about secularism, the underlying discourse served

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<sup>21</sup> Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 16.

only to stigmatize the Muslim and, more specifically, Arab populations of France and was aimed first and foremost at women—and the “conspicuous” display of their bodies. Attempts to portray the headscarf as a symbol of the oppression of “the” Muslim woman were for Scott the expression of a sexual nationalism in which secularism and sexual freedom have become synonymous. In a discourse that blames Muslims for the failure of republican integration, “sexuality was the measure of difference, of the distance Muslims had to traverse if they were to become fully French.”<sup>22</sup>

Recently, on the occasion of the second “*Penser l’émancipation*” colloquium organized by the Université Paris-Ouest Nanterre in February 2014, Scott further elaborated on the issues explored in *The Politics of the Veil*, proposing a genealogy of the racist uses of sexual emancipation over the last few decades in an effort to exclude Muslims and, in particular, to deny them “the right to have rights.”<sup>23</sup> She calls attention to the current transformations of republican universalism, which now substitute the equality of sexually active individuals in place of previous demands for equality between abstract individuals. In other words, the dilemma is not so much that of the difference between the sexes as it is the difference between sexualities. While Scott defends the necessary sexual character of a democracy, i.e., one that integrates a plurality of sexual practices, she nevertheless suggests that this pluralism is used as a pretext for stigmatizing dominated populations, which seek to be recognized as full members of the Western European nation-states in which they reside.

Because Scott upends contemporary mythologies of republican universalism, her critical feminism and her involvement in the public debate has on occasion been attacked, rather vehemently at times, by a segment of the French intellectual class that views her work as the product of a “noisy” and “cantankerous” radicalism typical of feminism “à l’américaine.” This opposition came to the fore most notably during the Strauss-Kahn scandal in 2011. Denouncing the way French politicians and journalists had sought to downplay the accusation of rape lodged against then International Monetary Fund head Dominique Strauss-Kahn (one journalist in particular had gone so far as to characterize the incident as merely “forced sex with the maid” and so the prerogative of a libertine elite), Scott criticized a certain “French theory of seduction” that rejects the power relations at work in sexuality.<sup>24</sup> Her opinion piece for the *New York Times* elicited sharp criticism from Irène Théry, Mona Ozouf, Claude Habib, and Philippe Raynaud, who defended a feminism “à la française,” touting instead “equal rights between the sexes and the asymmetrical pleasures of seduction.”<sup>25</sup> The support received by Scott from leading French philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists in the field of gender studies does not allow for this controversy to be chalked up to a simple Franco-American divide.<sup>26</sup> In the eyes of her supporters, it is more a question of the opposition between a critical feminism and a conservative feminism that is revealed in moments of sexual politicization. The supposed *modus vivendi* between the sexes in France is an ideological line of defense abstracting the question of sexuality from heterosexual male domination. And here, as elsewhere, the historian in Scott reacts to the present by proposing

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<sup>22</sup> Joan W. Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 166.

<sup>23</sup> Her talk can be found on the online journal *Contretemps*. Joan W. Scott, “[Émancipation et égalité: une généalogie critique](#),” *Contretemps*, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> “Trousser les soubrettes,” an old French sexist expression referring to the act of having forced sex with maids, were the words Jean-François Kahn, founder of *Marianne*, used on May 18, 2011, to describe the incident before apologizing several weeks later. Joan W. Scott, “Feminism? A Foreign Import,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Irène Théry, “Un féminisme à la française,” *Le Monde*, May 28, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Joan W. Scott, “La réponse de Joan Scott,” *Libération*, June 22, 2011; Didier Eribon, “Féminisme à la française, ça n’existe pas,” *Libération*, June 30, 2011; See also Mathieu Trachman and Laure Bereni, “[Genre: état des lieux](#),” *La Vie des idées*, 2011.

ways to deconstruct the historical discourses of the French Republic and reveal the inequalities that they can legitimate in relationships between the sexes or in relationships of race or sexuality.

“Feminism is only possible when it is free and critical,” wrote the revolutionary feminist Suzanne Blaise in 1975.<sup>27</sup> Using gender as a permanent tool for unveiling inequality, Scott’s work persuasively seconds that claim. While her work and the deconstructionist methodology that she favors sometimes tend to place gender more on the side of critical theory than on the side of historical practice, the fact remains that her reflections on the concept and the paradoxes of republican universalism are continually drawn on and reworked in the humanities and the social sciences, above all in the field of history.

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<sup>27</sup> The article first appeared in activist journals in 1975. It has recently been republished: Suzanne Blaise, “Reflexions sur le féminisme ou pour un féminisme critique,” *Genre, sexualité & société* 3 (2010).