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Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. vii + 208 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$24.94 U.S. (cl), ISBN 978-0-691-1243-5.

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On March 15, 2004, the French government passed a law banning the wearing of « conspicuous signs » of religious affiliation within public schools. The decision was not taken lightly and followed the detailed report of the Stasi commission, issued in December 2003 after six months of investigation. While the law forbade Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans, and large crosses, the real concern focused on headscarves worn by Muslim girls. By analyzing the political discourse surrounding the headscarf controversy, Joan Wallach Scott pursues her deconstruction of French republican discourse which has long interested her as an historian, a gender theorist, and a critic of democratic politics. *The Politics of the Veil* offers a cogent critique of policy-makers and their misuse of history in defending an ideal of abstract individualism central to French republican democracy. Above all, however, Scott reveals the racist and sexist underpinnings of a passionately debated legal measure enacted to preserve a mythological vision of French republicanism and *laïcité*. This vision relied on a notion of individualism that achieves its universalist status “by positing the sameness of all individuals, a sameness that is achieved not simply by swearing allegiance to the nation but by assimilating to the norms of its culture” (p.13). Without flattening the complexity of the issues raised in the headscarf controversies, Scott argues persuasively for the dangers associated with the French refusal to accept “difference,” whether that between Islam and France or that between the sexes. Her alternative is to recognize shared difference as the basis for democratic politics in the twenty-first century.

Although *The Politics of the Veil* reads like a political essay, its power to convince lies in Scott's ability to analyze the political discourses surrounding the veil historically. The book tackles with impressive sweep the complex histories of French colonialism, immigration, the school and secularism, drawing on theoretical approaches from a similarly impressive range of disciplines: political theory, feminist theory, philosophy, sociology, and psychoanalysis. From this sophisticated intellectual arsenal, Scott has produced a book of uncommon clarity and concision that addresses successively the complex and interrelated issues of racism, secularism, individualism and sexuality in French history and society. In the process, she demonstrates how historians can engage constructively in contemporary political debates.

The book begins with a critical overview of the three moments in the headscarf controversy (in 1989, 1994 and 2003). This offers essential background for understanding the book's underlying question: why did the headscarf generate such intense controversy? More specifically, Scott asks how the veil has become a way to talk about issues of ethnicity and integration in France and Western Europe (p. 5), noting along the way the semantic slippage in the use of the term *voile* for *foulard*. By analyzing the discourses on the veil, and exploring why French Republicans saw the need to ban the headscarf, she seeks to recover the complexity of a political debate that was often reduced to familiar binary oppositions: between traditional and modern, church and state, identity and equality. From the outset, Scott highlights the political context that sheds light on the headscarf controversies, notably the growth of the extreme right in French politics, the pressures felt within France as a result of European

construction and the growth in political Islam between 1989 and 2003. Still, she concludes, the successful passage of the law forbidding conspicuous signs of religious affiliation cannot be solely blamed on Le Pen and the international context; it was also the product of historical factors and, specifically, a deep strain of unacknowledged racism in French society.

The two most substantive historical chapters concern the issues of racism and secularism in French society. This juxtaposition of that which the French refuse to acknowledge—racism—with that which the French profess as a fundamental value of the Republic—secularism—allows Scott to play with the metaphor of veiling and unveiling to considerable political effect. The colonial legacy of Algeria has only recently become the subject of scholarship in France and Scott's treatment highlights the need to grapple seriously with the ways the French civilizing mission in Algeria posited the inassimability of Islam from the outset. This resulted in a racist treatment of emigrant Algerian workers from the early twentieth century on; as a result, the media treatment of the "immigrant" problem of the late 1970s and 1980s in the wake of the Iranian Revolution drew on and amplified a long history of discrimination against Algerians.

The imperial project in Algeria had a gendered dimension as well which Scott analyses through the multiplicity of contradictory images surrounding women. The Orientalist interest in the harem, the profusion of sexual images on postcards, the rise of prostitution in the colony, all testify to the fascination provoked by images of veiled women where the veil signaled both sexual provocation and the denial of sex (p. 60). Well before the headscarf controversies of the late 20th century, the French viewed the veil with enthralment and distrust, but it acquired a specifically political significance—testimony to the inassimability of Islam—during the Algerian war of independence when it became associated with feminine militancy. The specificity of the Algerian situation and of France's history with Algeria was somewhat forgotten, however, in the late 20th century as political Islam acquired an increasingly frightening face. Here Scott deploys one of her elegant argumentative strategies as she contrasts the treatment of Muslims in France with that of Jews. While anti-Semitism also has a long history in French culture, Scott argues for its decline following World War II despite the arrival of North African Jews whose behavior paralleled that of Muslims without generating the same animus. The French recognition of historical wrongs in relation to Vichy and the acknowledgment of the possibility of the full integration of Jews contrast strongly with the situation of Muslims. The latter are perceived in French society in communal terms and their behavior is stigmatized for their supposed refusal to assimilate into French civilization—witness President Nicolas Sarkozy's reference in February 2007 to (Muslim) immigrants slitting sheep's throats in their bathtubs. And in this French construction of Islam, the veil is seen as an aggression against the values of French individualism, and is weighted with the unresolved legacy of French colonial domination in North Africa.

If racism was the subtext of the 2005 law, secularism was the explicit justification for its necessary implementation. Through a careful examination of *laïcité* as a product of a specific history, Scott uncovers the fault-lines in this ostensibly universal principle. Writing for an American audience, she distinguishes between different historical traditions of secularism. Whereas in the United States secularism implies the protection of religion from interference by the State, in France it means the separation of church and state through the State's protection of individuals from the claims of religion (p.91). This distinction is essential to understanding what for most Americans remains an incomprehensible decision to discriminate against Muslim girls by preventing them from wearing headscarves within public schools. Understanding the roots of this political decision, and unveiling its discriminatory subtext, involves analyzing the particular history of *laïcité*, especially with respect to schooling and the vision of nation and citizen that underlay this history. Unlike the history of French racism, this is a more familiar story, resting as it does on the foundational myths of the Third Republic. Scott argues persuasively for the way this story acquired a mythological dimension, or became re-mythologized, in the context of the French bicentennial, as groups such as women, gays and lesbians and immigrants challenged the universalist assumptions incarnated in the values of the Republic.

Scott highlights the « unbending » conception of *laïcité* that underlay arguments defending a public school system that decided to exclude in order to integrate (to paraphrase loosely former minister of education François Bayrou). This rigidity appears all the more ideological given the realities of *laïcité*'s implementation over the past hundred years. As historians of this period have shown, compromise and flexibility characterized its day-to-day negotiation particularly within girls' schools and among schoolteachers in the difficult years following the anti-clerical laws of between 1882 and 1905.[1] Nuns donned lay habits in schoolrooms but maintained their religious vows. In the colonies, recent work has revealed a selective application of the secular laws, depending on the local context.[2] In the metropole, the willingness to compromise on the principle of *laïcité* when the religion concerned was Catholicism, continued throughout the twentieth century in the departments of Alsace-Moselle where religious instruction remains a part of the public school curriculum to this day. Yet Alsace was a region where the reaction to girls wearing headscarves was the most virulent; there "veiled" girls were prevented from entering schools where crucifixes still adorned the walls and where religious instruction in Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism, but not Islam, was offered.[3] Scott's analysis builds on that of sociologists of education who have argued for the way political discourse at the turn of the 21st century used the debate about *laïcité* to avoid facing the social and economic problems confronting a secondary school for the masses, which had never been conceived to integrate outsiders (unlike the Third Republican primary school). Schoolteachers were amongst the most outspoken supporters of the ban, seeing it as a way to reinforce their authority. Both schoolteachers and policy-makers adhered to an abstract vision of the Nation, united and indivisible, where individuals shed their social selves upon entering the public school in order to integrate the values of the Republic. This vision of the school's function, however, was a myth from its origins, and by the late 20th century the failure to recognize how social and economic problems affected the functioning of a mass secondary school system left the door open to an interpretation that scapegoated Muslim girls.

Why Muslim girls became the focus of such passionate controversy about schools, rather than their more violent brothers, becomes clear in the final two chapters. These address the vexed issue of the nature of the individual and of sexual difference within universalist Republican discourse, issues Scott has addressed at much greater length in earlier books.[4] These chapters draw most explicitly on the theoretical insights Scott has progressively honed since her seminal article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" [5], and retrospectively illuminate with greater clarity the arguments made in the first two chapters about the strength of sterilizing binaries in the history of French republican thought about difference. For proponents of the law, the autonomous self was an objective fact and the veil never represented a reasonable choice. While opponents sought to introduce complexity into this debate, allowing the girls' voices to emerge briefly in the debate and arguing for a more modern reading of the decision to wear a veil, such arguments were largely drowned out in the media coverage on both the left and the right. The media condemned the veil's lack of transparency and highlighted the connection with forms of political Islam imported from abroad. As secular feminists writing in *Prochoix* argued in the summer of 2003: "A veil can hide a beard" (p. 133). French feminist support for what appeared to be a blatant form of sexist discrimination against girls is probably what most puzzled American observers of these controversies.

The book's final chapter on sexuality makes explicit the connections between the sexual and the political. Scott uses debates about visibility and sexual freedom to highlight the contrast in discursive systems operating among French republicans who supported the ban and those who questioned it. Specifically, she reveals the weight of idealized gender systems in the controversy and argues that "Islam's insistence on recognizing the difficulties posed by sexuality revealed more than republicans wanted to see about the limits of their own system" (p.154). Drawing on the terminology of the sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar, Scott discusses the difference between an "open" and "covered" approach to gender relations with reference to the treatment of the sexed body and ties these to positions taken during the debates. The feminist psychoanalyst Elisabeth Roudinesco denounced the

veil as a denial of women as “objects of desire,” revealing in the process a belief in the superiority of the French approach to sexuality. As Scott writes: “The point was to bring Muslim women up to the standard of their French sisters (a version of the civilizing mission with all of its racist and colonial implications), free to display their bodies and experience the joys of sex—as French society (women and men) understood them” (p.162). The highly publicized group of women from the suburbs who had organized to denounce violence against women, *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises*, supported the ban because “The Islamic veil subjects all of us, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, to an intolerable discrimination against women” (p.164). The visible wearing of difference was presented as insufferable within a Republican system based on abstract individualism and, ironically, many French feminists, in their defense of sexual freedom, forgot their own critiques of the French patriarchal system and its objectification of women to defend a mythical notion of a unified France. In the process, the rights of Muslim girls to choose a way of being in the world which included a headscarf were ignored to defend a “superior” way of arranging relations between the sexes.

As the preceding necessarily reductive presentation of the books’ arguments reveal, Scott clearly presents the headscarf ban as a discriminatory measure that was made possible because of a long history of racial and sexual discrimination in French republican thought. Her own passionate plea in the conclusion lies in a vision of democratic politics that recognizes difference. Borrowing from the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of “being-in-common,” she argues that this *être en commun*, where community is not a shared essence, is the necessary basis for a future where nations are confronted by cultural, religious and ethnic diversity.

It will be interesting to see how French scholarly circles and members of the reading public react to the book once it is translated. This “American” approach to the management of diversity is all too often described in France as *communautarisme*, which is seen as contrary to the values of French abstract individualism. And yet the refusal to recognize difference may have reached its limits in French contemporary society, and I’m writing this as French newspapers report with concern about yet another incident of profanation of Muslim tombs. French academics may criticize a presentation that at times minimizes the complexity of ideological positions within French intellectual or political communities (why so little discussion, for example, of SOS Racisme?). Many will no doubt regret that while Scott devotes two pages to article 4 in the law of February 23, 2005 requiring programs of university research to recognize the “positive role played by the French presence overseas, notably in North Africa,” she fails to mention that protest, particularly from historians, resulted in this article being withdrawn from the law almost a year later.[6] French academic feminists, notably those opposed to the ban, may believe that their arguments are underrepresented, but one can, of course, argue that these arguments were not very audible in the political discourse that most interests Scott.[7] These will, however, be quibbles that should not detract from the essential: Scott offers an elegant intellectual and political argument that moves beyond an impassioned defense of values into a more critical understanding of the underlying stakes. It is indeed telling that a recent stimulating book on religion, gender, and *laïcité* deliberately chose not to include a chapter on the “headscarf controversy” arguing “la proximité avec la polémique sur le foulard en France ne nous a pas semblé propice à une réflexion apaisée et distanciée sur ce terrain et nous avons privilégié au contraire la distanciation et le décentrement, repoussant à plus tard le moment de confronter les points de vue.”[8] It is to be hoped that the translation of *The Politics of the Veil* will promote such an exchange of ideas and encourage debate about arguments whose power lies in bringing together a deep understanding of French history with a critical distance from the mythologizing tendencies of French republican discourse.

## NOTES

[1] See Sarah Curtis, *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), especially, p. 146-171. Jacques Ozouf, Mona Ozouf, with Véronique Aubert and Claire Steinbecker, *La République des instituteurs* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p.171-206.

[2] See Pierre-Jean Luizard, ed., *Le Choc colonial et l'Islam. Les politiques religieuses des puissances coloniales en terres d'Islam* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

[3] Roland Pfefferkorn, "Alsace-Moselle: un statut scolaire non laïque," *Revue des Sciences sociales* 38 (2007): 158-171.

[4] Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); *Parité: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[5] Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 28-50.

[6] <http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2006/20062031/20062031.htm>.

[7] See, for example, Florence Rochefort, "Foulard, genre et laïcité en 1989," *Vingtième Siècle* 75 (2002): 145-156 as well as the very recent analyses of Françoise Gaspard, "Le foulard de la dispute," *Cahiers du genre* hors-série, "Féminisme(s) Recomposition et mutations" (2006): 75-93, and the special issue of *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, "Sexisme et racisme: le cas français," 25 (2006).

[8] Florence Rochefort, ed., *Le pouvoir du genre. Laïcités et religions 1905-2005* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2007), p. 22.

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