

Reviews

Debunking the Myth of Sexual Freedom and Secularism

Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton University Press. 2018. 256 pages. ISBN 9781400888580.

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In *Sex and Secularism* Joan Wallach Scott questions the widespread representation of secularism as a guarantor of gender equality and sexual freedom. As Scott persuasively argues, there is nothing stable and universal about secularism, and the assumption that gender equality constitutes one of its inherent features is simply false. In fact, there is a wealth of evidence that the superiority of men over women played a constitutive role in the formation of secular democracies in 19th century Western Europe and the U.S.

Invoking Foucault's theory of discourse and his genealogical technique, Scott approaches secularism not as a fixed category, but as a "discursive field of power" (p. 4) that has been differently articulated and deployed in distinct historical contexts. This perspective allows Scott to expose the ways in which the recent revival of the discourse of secularism and its pairing with gender equality coincides with another political shift – replacement of communism with Islam as the main "other" against which the alleged Western superiority has been constructed in the post-Cold War era. In this context, claims Scott, the false identification of Western secularism with gender equality has played a crucial role in the construction of the universalised asymmetrical binary between the secular West as a guarantor of women's equality and freedom, and Islam as inherently fundamentalist and patriarchal. This hierarchical binary has been systematically deployed as a means of reifying Western racial and religious supremacy, and, by extension, of excluding Muslims and other racialised immigrants from citizenship. At the same time, by representing gender equality in the countries of Western Europe as achieved and secured by its secular governance, the post-Cold War discourse of secularism conceals the existing gender inequalities in the West and, thus, actually contributes to their persistence.

In order to challenge the claim that secularism has always been closely intertwined with the idea of gender equality and sexual freedom, Joan Scott traces different ways in which sexual difference has figured in discourses of secularism since the early deployment of the term in 19th century Western Europe

and the U.S. She does so by revisiting a large body of feminist, post-colonial, and history literature that in different ways reveal various meanings that the term acquired in distinct social and political landscapes. Scott brings together this truly extensive scope of literature and approaches it with new interpretive lenses with the particular focus on the interplay between secularism and gender. Scott's genealogical inquiry is remarkably wide both in terms of time and space, starting from the early deployments of secularism in the late 18th century, and looking at the developments in both Western Europe and the U.S. Such a broad scope makes the central argument of the book – that secularism does not necessarily secure gender equality – compelling and well grounded.

While the book's introduction is dedicated to setting up its rationale, the first three chapters are devoted to revealing the ways in which the perceived hierarchical binary between sexes played a key role in setting up the terms in which secularism was conceptualised and debated in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the first chapter, Scott discusses the strong link between women and religion that was established in and through 19th century discourses of secularism. Both were then relegated to the sphere of privacy, as a sphere that is associated with emotions and irrationality as opposed to the rational, male secular sphere of democratic governance. Once associated with religion, women were perceived as a threat to the newly emerging rational, democratic, secular order, and excluded from political participation. In order to diminish the influence of both women and religion on the secular state, argues Scott, men were assigned dominance in the family. Such a male-headed family represented the bedrock of secularising nation-states. What is more, as Scott shows, the gendered logic of secularism was further imposed on Middle Eastern societies through Western secular imperialism, producing in this way new forms of women's subordination in these contexts.

In the second chapter, Scott continues by exploring the discourses that reinforced the hierarchical division of public and private spheres in secular modernity. Here, she focuses on the association of women with reproduction as one of the central features of the 19th and early 20th century discourses of secularism that legitimised the division of labour between sexes. The association of women with reproduction was based on the reference to nature and science, which occupied an important epistemological position in secularising societies. The perception of sexual difference in terms of natural, biological differences fed into the perception of the sexual division of labour not in terms of asymmetry, but complementarity. Men and women, based on their biological differences, were seen as having different capacities for contributing to the nation, creating in this way a harmonious whole. Women's contribution, based on their reproductive capacity and perceived irrational nature, was seen solely in terms of producing citizens and, thus, securing the perpetuation of a nation and its racial purity. Perpetuation of life and nation, argues Scott, had par-

ticular social standing, as it displaced anxiety about death in a post-religious, secularising time.

The third chapter further exposes the central role that conjugal family and asymmetric sexual difference played in the secularising modernity. It looks at how this essentialised sexual difference was used to prevent women's participation in politics and shows how preceding women's political emancipation was a century-long (in some cases even longer) secularisation that was based on the exclusion of women from citizenship. Here, Scott discusses the tautological logic of secular modernity showing how the natural difference of sex served as a means of legitimising men's political authority, while, in turn, men's political authority represented the evidence of natural sexual difference. Women's suffrage movements were perceived as a threat to the social and political order by putting in danger the reproduction of the nation and its racial/ethnic purity. Unfortunately, as Scott observes, giving women the right to vote did not change the asymmetrical gender relations.

In the fourth chapter, Scott focuses on the Cold War period and shows how the discourse of secularism was marginalised in the context of the Cold War. She relates this to the ways in which the notion of individual freedom, including religious and sexual freedom, was employed as a one of the main arguments against communism. With the affirmation of the freedom of religion, the notion of secularism has become increasingly connected to Christianity. As Scott argues, it was in this period that the close link between Christianity and development of secular democracy was established and reinforced. At the same time, sexual freedom started to be perceived as one of the founding principles of secular democracy, closely associated with the discourse of free choice. These shifts in the Cold War period paved the way for the post-Cold War discourses of the "clash of civilisations", which confronted Christian secular democracy as a guarantee of individual freedom to fundamentalist, repressive Islamic autocracy.

The fifth and final chapter is dedicated to the ways in which this hierarchical binary between the West and Islam has played a critical role in the new discourses of secularism, with a particular focus on contemporary France. As Scott argues, present-day secularism invokes the notion of sexual desire as a defining attribute of the human, and the ability to fulfil this desire is regarded as a crucial element of human freedom. On the grounds of this logic, the distinction between the West and Islam has been articulated through a juxtaposition of the uncovered bodies of Western women (perceived as liberated to follow their desire) and the covered bodies of Muslim women (seen as unfree). As Scott further argues, the reduction of women's emancipation and equality to public visibility of their bodies defines femininity in terms of male desire and moves attention from the tangible inequalities (in fields such as labour market, politics, and family) in Western and non-Western contexts alike.

Sex and Secularism convincingly shows how it is false to assume that gender inequality represents some unfortunate and temporary side effect of early secularisation that, given the inherently egalitarian logic of secularism, was gradually overcome. In contrast to such claims, Scott reveals that the asymmetrical difference of the sexes was in fact an important foundational feature of secular discourse until fairly recently. By doing so, Scott masterfully exposes secularism as a political discourse imbued with contradictions and open to different interpretations. As any other discursive formation, secularism could be deployed, as it was in different historical contexts, to marginalise and domesticate women, and to exclude different groups of people from citizenship.

This view, which strips secularism of its false, universal egalitarian features, is especially significant for the contemporary moment in which secularism is invoked not only in the context of racialised anti-immigration sentiments, but also as a counterbalance to the growing Christianity-informed resistance to gender and LGBTQ rights in Europe and the U.S. This timely book brings crucial insights that could help progressive actors in finding ways of conceptualising secularism without falling into the trap of false and exclusionary generalisations. Finally, by bringing together relevant literature from diverse scholarly fields – from political theory and gender studies to history and sociology – this compelling book will be important reading for scholars interested in gender, religion and secularism, theories of state and citizenship, post-colonial/de-colonial theories, and critical race studies.

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