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Review of Scott, *Sex & Secularism*, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. 235 pp. ISBN:9781400888580

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Historian Joan Scott's *Sex & Secularism* provides a wonderful historical and contemporary account of the interactions and entanglements of secularism, gender, and sexuality. The book sets out on a historical quest, pre-eminently in Europe and the USA, to trace the genealogies of sexual and gendered arrangements frequently taken for granted today. Scott, however, scrutinizes these intricate settlements, and reveals the many problematic gendered assumptions.

Scott in chapter one advances by describing how, in 19th century and early 20th century Europe, secularism distributed an image of the world as characterized by several important natural divisions, including the private and the public, the male and female, and the rational and religious. Scott illustrates how such conceptions prevailed but she additionally elucidates how they operated in racist colonialist discourses where they legitimized discriminations of Others who were deemed not capable of understanding these pivotal divisions. Chapter 2 puts forward the evolutionary understandings undergirding the assignment of women to the private sphere. Scott firstly exhibits how the progress of civilization of the white race became linked with specialized functions assigned to each sex: men were destined to rule, women to breed. This relegation of women to breed in the private sphere was taken to simultaneously incite a rationalization of the public sphere, as religion, largely associated with femininity, had to be sequestered from public as well.

According to Scott, the subsequent subjugating discourse of rationalism, however, proved insufficient as it, in contrast to previous religious notions, could not provide a satisfying answer to existential questions. Death, for example, simply became an unwelcome 'rupture' that everyone simply had to face. Unsatisfied with rationalism's incapability of dealing with these existential topics, men began to highlight the productive functions of the women. Women were capable of producing children and hence could guarantee the future of the nation. The married couple, and the nuclear families they were conceived of, hence became the foundation of health of the nation, bridging the previously-mentioned gap of meaning.

In Chapter 3, Scott submits that women's ostensible emancipatory right to vote did, in fact, not succeed in eroding the prevailing explanations of men and women's perceived natural differences. Nor did it effectively combat the disqualifications and discriminations of women resulting from such depictions. Rather, Scott argues, the unequal state of affairs was prolonged, and even effectively legitimized through the articulation of a double indeterminacy of gender and politics. On the one hand, it was argued that any uncertainty about gender was to be avoided if the social order were to remain intact. This was reflected for example in the ferocity with which national leaders policed the boundaries of sexual difference and invoked nature as a guarantee that those boundaries would remain in place. On the other hand, it was claimed that the current power of men in the social and political organization reflected and demonstrated the importance and truth of nature's law. Scott argues that this double argument, and the indeterminacy of gender and politics that it builds on, is at the very heart of the discourse of secularism.

Chapter 4 moves away from the 19th- and early 20th century material to the second half of the 20th century, when explicit references to secularism faded from view in the West as they lost their political relevance in the context of the Cold War. Scott argues that the old public/private distinction was dissolved in the realms of both religion and sexuality. Instead, a new discourse emerged, where secularity and Christianity were increasingly perceived to be synonymous, and where women's sexual emancipation became the primary indicator of gender equality. This discourse initially portrayed Soviet communism as a threat to social order, but eventually replaced it with Islam.

In the final chapter, Scott further scrutinizes this anti-Islam rhetoric in the current discourse of secularism and in particular its appeals to contemporary 'sexual democracies'. Scott argues that the deployment of the language of sexual emancipation and gender equality to dismiss Muslim claims for recognition as full members of Western European nation-states, is not just Islamophobia. It also points us to a recent Western embracement of a new universal human quality: the sex drive, understood to be prosocial and whose satisfaction is neither a relative matter nor an issue open to contestation. The need for sexual satisfaction – and the emancipation of women that is believed to follow its fulfillment – is deemed universally applicable and an important indicator of societal freedom. Meanwhile, though, the normativities and inequalities that the sex drive features are effectively concealed: there is, for example, no guarantee whatsoever that this sex drive leads to equality. Conflating definitions of emancipation with equality, this universal sexual desire is utilized as an instrument geared towards the prolongation of inequality of women in the west.

Sex and Secularism does what a lot of scholars have called for: it aims to present an insightful and extensive empirical account of secularism. It draws on many sources, in many contexts, which indicates the huge amount of work that Scott has conducted in order to be able to write this book. Additionally, the book puts forward a great and very relevant argument about how suggestions of universal differences between men and women legitimize models for social and political organizations, and how these models, subsequently, are called upon to underscore gender roles. For contemporary situations, it explains, for example, how anti-Islam rhetorics legitimize themselves on the grounds of an alleged universal need for sexual satisfaction, to, subsequently, argue that this

sexual satisfaction can only be achieved in particular ways that are incompatible with Islam.

While reading, though, I sometimes wondered whether it was really secularism that was examined all the time. Scott states to be tracing down the term secularism (p. 4), which in my view she does not, as the term is not cited in the sources Scott examines. Rather, she explores a discursive field of secularism, for which the word not necessarily has to appear. But this then made me wonder about which sources were deemed part of what Scott deems 'the' discourse of secularism, and which were not. I am hesitant to agree that we can ascribe all the features Scott observes to the ideology of secularism. Additionally, I am not always convinced that the sources Scott puts forward are as representative as suggested in the book. There obviously are discrepancies between the statements made by people in public discourses, and the things they do and say in their daily life. I can imagine that this is a methodological challenge that any historian frequently faces, but still, being a non-historian, I would have appreciated some reflection in this regard.

In general, though, I consider the book a very important contribution to the study of secularity, religion, gender, sexuality, but also modernity at large. Scott succeeds in connecting dots between gender and secularism that many perhaps sensed to be somehow pertaining but that nobody so far really was capable of explaining. Scott not only argues that secularism has inculcated particular notions and sensibilities many perceive to be neutral, she also clearly puts these on the table, penetrating their secular concealment, and de-naturalizing their often assigned status of neutrality.