

Book Review

Joan Wallach Scott (ed.)

Sex and Secularism

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017, ISBN 9780691160641, 256 pp., £22.95)

Many individuals have traditionally asserted that secular societies are much more likely to facilitate equality among the sexes. This should be a familiar refrain to not only the casual observer but many academics as well. After all, religion is traditionally associated with a bifurcated system of gender roles that frequently relegates women to the status of second-class citizen. However, this view is countered in Joan Wallach Scott's *Sex and Secularism*, a book contained detailed research into the traditional history of gender roles within a secularized society defined by the separation of church and state. Throughout these pages, Scott weaves an argument that reveals the myth behind the prevailing view that secularism is equated with progress and religion with backwardness.

The ideals behind this work were rooted in Scott's own study of gender and women's history in France, which provided significant evidence against the general argument that "gender equality was a primordial value of democracy" (Scott, 2017, 15). Scott begins her argument with the notion that secularism is actually influenced by the church in many ways. She noted that the Judeo-Christian tradition actually forms the basis of the values of a secular democracy. This would seemingly mean that it would be impossible to completely separate the two, at least in terms of effects of initial influence. However, Scott also highlights the myth of a true secular Western society, noting, "Most of the men who tried to separate the Churches from the State, wanted to make society more Christian even while they made the state more secular" (Scott, 2017, 33). The overarching point presented here is that Protestantism utilized secularism as a counterbalance to Catholicism and non-Christian religions.

While religion would dictate that distinct gender roles of women and men were due to God-endowed differences, secularism did not do away with the propagation of these differences. Instead, it simply shifted the source. According to Scott (2017), "Human biology was the ultimate source of the unequal and distinctive roles ... designat[ing] women's bodies as the

agents of reproduction” (60). She provided a great wealth of historical sources beginning in the late 180s in support of this position, highlighting notions from period texts that women were less fit at intellectual or manual tasks due to the need to promote the reproductive functionality of their bodies. In other words, with the loss of religion as a societal instrument of control over women, they turned to science to continue to exert that control.

Throughout the book, Scott continues to illustrate evidence for her central thesis in a clear, methodical presentation. She highlights the reality of the exclusivity of early democracies with only men given the right of suffrage. She further highlights the strong resistance to women’s suffrage movements, as “they seemed to call into question men’s dominant position in the family, as well as the very qualities that defined masculinity” (Scott, 2017, 104). She also noted that the advent of communism and America’s engagement in the Cold War was used as a method of subjugating women, equating women’s rights and feminism to Soviet strategies to disrupt enemies. In fact, despite the progress made in the 1960s in terms of the sexual revolution, people like Margaret Sanger had to advocate for access to birth control not as a woman’s right but as a strategy for the preservation of democratic nations.

Overall, Scott’s work is extremely well organized and based upon fact. The argument she successfully counters in this work—that secularism is associated by nature with gender equality—is certainly one that is preeminent within Western society. However, Scott’s expert chronological dissection of this premise illustrates the inherent flaws in that argument. While religion can certainly be seen as creating distinct gender roles, the history of democratic society has been equally offensive in terms of its treatment of women.

In retrospect, this conclusion should not be as surprising as it is. After all, it is well documented that women are paid significantly less than men for doing the same work. Furthermore, despite very recent efforts at legislation and the successes of the feminist movement, it does not take more than a cursory glance at the news (i.e. transgender bathrooms, the #MeToo movement) to realize the continued inequality of gender within the democratic world. Scott further pointed out the rather recent advocacy of purported gender equality within the west as less of a value than a tactic for positioning a culture war against Islamic nations in a post-9/11 world. This further highlights the problematic nature of assuming greater benevolence towards women or facilitation of gender equality simply due to secularism. After all, efforts to promote women’s rights such as the Women’s March of the recent years are often met with comparison to the Islamic world, with the assertion that things could always be worse as evidence against continued advocacy.

In many ways, the true success of *Sex and Secularism* should be pointing out the obvious. A secular society does not mean an equal society. Western democracies were created largely by and for rich white men. Any reader should be familiar with the efforts by various women's movements over the course of history to engage in a slow march towards equality. However, it is perhaps the knowledge of these efforts that also create a bit of trickery, allowing for this progress to be seen as evidence of the arrival of true gender equality. As such, it is reasonable—although illogical—that secularism has become associated with gender equality. By expertly countering this assertion with a carefully crafted argument throughout the pages of this work, Scott has successfully revealed the continued hypocrisy of Western democracies. Moreover, she has deftly identified the various ways throughout history that social control was exerted on women in a manner that ensured the continued power and dominance of men. By exposing the reader to this, Scott has also succeeded in enabling the reader to better view and critique current methods of gender subjugation as well.

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