

JOAN WALLACH SCOTT AND THE “POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION”

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In the wake of the second wave of feminism beginning in the 1960s, female scholars developed a collective need to include women within historical analysis. According to feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott, it was necessary to contribute to the contemporary formation of women’s identities. Scott explains that “herstory” emerged as an attempt to assert women’s role and agency in history and to therefore provide women a historical identity. As she articulates, “I assume that history’s representations of the past help construct gender for the present.”¹ As a factor in identity formation, a key facet of feminism, it was imperative that women’s histories successfully integrate females into the historical narrative and provide them the historical basis on which modern women could construct their identity and therefore assert political, social, and economic equality.

Scott contends, however, that women’s history was characterized by tensions of “practical politics and academic scholarship; between received disciplinary standards and interdisciplinary influences; between history’s atheoretical stance and feminism’s need for theory.”² That is, women’s historians were torn between contemporary politics and historical scholarship. In response to the tensions that divided women’s historians between politics and scholarship, feminist historians reinterpreted history to promote greater female political influence. Scott advanced women’s history not only by

1. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 2.

2. *Ibid.*, 17.

integrating women into the historical landscape but also by redefining the landscape itself, repurposing it for the production of knowledge that would contribute to feminists' fight for political equality. primarily by generating gender and identity discourse. Feminist historians sought greater insight into historical constructions of gender, but it was necessary to first challenge previous historiography.

Scott often references historian Michel de Certeau and his proposition that the very creation of women's history as a separate subfield signified that the discipline and methodology of history is necessarily incomplete.³ This implies that history, because it is necessarily incomplete, is also a product of contemporary knowledge, and as such, historians are obligated to consciously consider their contemporaneous influences. Certeau's theory did not go uncontested; more traditional historians disputed it "by invoking an opposition between 'history' (that knowledge gained through neutral inquiry) and 'ideology' (knowledge distorted by considerations of interest)."⁴ The opposition of history and ideology has long been a criticism of feminist history. Certeau asserts, however, that "history" is not neutral but is, as their definition of "ideology" suggests, influenced by the interests or assumptions of the historian. Historians are therefore obligated to continuously question at least their own, if not the disciplinary, boundaries and assumptions of the field. It is the role of historians, and according to Scott, feminist historians in particular, to constantly challenge the discipline to remain relevant to the contemporary.

For Scott, the application of post-structuralist theories outlining relative linguistic and cultural meanings of gender and the processes that produce them provides feminist history a means of redefining women's history. Feminist history has successfully incorporated women not simply as additional subjects but also as "agent[s] of narrative."⁵ Acknowledging women as "agent[s] of narrative" suggests that women shaped the historic landscape as well as their own identity, agency, and the definitions of gender.⁶ Scott states, "I assume that history's representations of the past help construct gender for the present. Analyzing how that happens requires

3. Joan Wallach Scott, *American Feminist Thought At Century's End: A Reader*, ed. Linda S. Kauffman (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 243.

4. Ibid.

5. Scott, *Gender and the Politics*, 17.

6. Ibid., 2.

attention to the assumptions, practices, and rhetoric of the discipline, to things either or so taken for granted or so outside customary practice that they are not usually a focus for historians' attention."⁷ Thus, feminist history not only seeks to inform current gender constructions but also to push the boundaries of history in subject and in discipline.

Scott has continuously redefined the boundaries and assumptions of historiography in her very unique interpretation of history, aptly identified as feminist history. In her redefinition of the historical landscape, Scott has effectively coalesced a number of epistemological and historiographical theories to generate an understanding of gender and the linguistic, political, and cultural expressions of it, as well as its influence on the formation of identity. Scott developed feminist history as "a fundamental recasting of the terms, standards, and assumptions of what has passed for objective, neutral, and universal history in the past, because that view of history included in its very definition of itself the exclusion of women."⁸ Scott redefines gender as a socially-constructed sexual hierarchy; this challenged the previous definition of gender as the biological difference between men and women. Thus, she provides a "fundamental recasting" of women's history as one apart from men.⁹ In a constantly evolving conceptualization of feminist historiography and gender analysis, Scott combines Derridean linguistic theory, psychoanalytic theories of identity formation, and Foucauldian power theory to form a uniquely interdisciplinary approach to history.

Scott, influenced by Michel Foucault, argues that the study of history has promoted gendered hierarchy. Foucault regarded the production of knowledge as an expression of power itself. Indeed, Scott utilizes a Foucauldian definition of knowledge "to mean the understanding produced by cultures and societies of human relationships, in this case between men and women," and as such knowledge is, "not absolute or true, but always relative."¹⁰ Consequently, knowledge, produced by a culture long-defined by masculine understanding, holds meaning relative to the existing gendered hierarchy. She continues, "Its uses and meanings become contested politically and are the means by which relationships of power- of domination and subordination- are constructed... Knowledge is a way of ordering

7. Ibid.

8. Scott, *American Feminist Thought*, 249.

9. Scott, *Gender and the Politics*, 20.

10. Ibid., 2.

the world; as such it is not prior to social organization, it is inseparable from social organization.”¹¹

For feminist historians this meant that previous historiography acted as a tool for the subordination of women because it had largely excluded women from the historical narrative and dismissed their contributions as insignificant in comparison with those of men. Scott also appeals to Foucault’s theory that the accord of the discipline will be broken when it is challenged.

Feminist history consequently became a method of challenging history’s gendered hierarchy. Utilizing the linguistic theories of Phillip Derrida and Foucault’s constructions of power, Scott suggests that language, and the cultural meanings and interpretations attached to it, have been a determining factor in the subordination of women. Feminist historians thus challenged the hierarchy by analyzing the language historically used to express gendered concepts. In addition, they investigated the factors contributing to the identity formation of women and demonstrated that these factors are always in flux. It became a way of understanding history not in previous terms of binary opposition of male to female but instead in relational terms used to express the relative meaning of femininity and masculinity.

According to Derrida, language has been defined in the binary opposition when in fact words and their meanings are culturally relative. To Scott this suggested that words must be contextualized within time and culture in order to understand their full meanings and implications. This focus on language has been simultaneously described as one of Scott’s greatest strengths and glaring weaknesses. Some historians are concerned that the focus on language is too exclusive and overlooks other factors influencing gender including social and political theory.

Scott maintains, however, that examination of language will illuminate the constructions and processes of gender. According to Derrida, in oppositional binaries contain primary, dominant words that draws meaning from secondary, subordinate words. In terms of male/female, males have represented the dominant, while female has represented the subordinate. Feminists utilized this theory to explore the past binary definitions of man/woman as well as masculine/feminine and their relative meanings within particular historical contexts. Derrida’s theory thereby constitutes the feminist historical idea that the past must be re-considered with greater attention to the language used to express gender.

11. Ibid.

In *Gender and the Politics of History*, one of Scott's most significant contributions, she defined gender as, "a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated."¹² Gender, although not the only means of articulating power, has been the most continuous and persistent means of articulating power in the Western World. Therefore, Scott's theorization of gender sought to determine the relative meaning and distribution of power between woman and man as a Derridean binary pair. As Scott indicates, "The point of new historical investigation is to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representations."¹³ Therefore, as a historical subject, gender analysis would serve feminist aims by disrupting the idea of fixed gender qualifications. Gender consequently became a category for the explorations of the constructions of difference and the influence those constructions had on the distribution of power throughout global history.

Within her exploration of gender, however, there arose a conundrum. "Women" as a subject was problematic because of its seemingly contradictory uses in history and in political expression of feminism. The definition of women within these two contexts can be somewhat at odds. As Scott indicates, "The unresolved question of whether 'women' is a singular or a radically diverse category, whether 'women' is a social category that pre-exists or is produced by history, is at the heart of both feminist history and the history of feminism."¹⁴ Scott suggests that feminist history serves a dual purpose of providing feminists a unified categorical "women" for political purposes, while historical study explores the experiences that define women as individuals within or outside the collective category. Studying women, and the different categorical intersections that define them both as individual and within the collective, has become an additional focus of feminist history. Feminist history has demonstrated that "women" as a social category pre-existed history and that it has simply transitioned in relative meaning within various historical contexts. There is an ever-present tension that seems to remain in balance within feminist history and indeed contributes to the analysis.

Feminism has lent to history its critique of the status quo, par-

12. Scott, *Gender and the Politics*, 45.

13. Ibid., 43.

14. Scott, *Feminism & History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

ticularly in relation to the production of knowledge and of history as a discipline. History, in turn, has provided feminism greater insight into the diversity of the experience that defines the woman that collectively form “women” to enact political change throughout the past. Feminist historians have transitioned beyond gender, though gender remains a category of analysis, to delve deeper into this exploration of differences. Difference has itself become a key tool of analysis for feminist historians. Discourse of difference provides new direction within feminist history to explain identity formation within historical context. Additionally, it expands the purview of history and contributes to the feminist cause both politically and historiographically.

As Scott declares, “What was needed was a way of thinking about difference and how its construction defined relations between individuals and social groups.”¹⁵ Gender provided an initial analysis that then turned to a more inclusive examination of the differences that contribute to the definition of women’s identity both collectively and individually. Psychoanalysis has been added to the mix in an effort to understand individual identity formation and how that contributes to women’s inclusion in the collective subject of “women.” As a study of the individual, it applies not only to the historical subject but to the historian as well. Scott, in reference to Certeau’s concepts regarding the influence of the historian on their work, or their knowledge production, suggests that they benefited from a psychoanalytic self-examination about “the investments historians [have] in the stories they produced, as well as those of the subjects about whom they wrote.”¹⁶ Scott suggests that psychoanalysis provides a method of reading that is highly critical of the language for both what it expresses within a given context, as well as what it consciously does not express. For Scott, psychoanalysis has offered to return the radical expression to feminist history where gender has been essentially stripped of any radical inclination. Indeed, in what is seemingly Scott’s initial stage of the application of psychoanalysis to history, the idea is quite radical and yet remains somewhat illusive.

Perhaps in the coming years Scott will provide another sizable contribution to the discipline and again redefine the landscape with her theories on the application of psychoanalysis in history. For the time be-

15. Scott, *American Feminist Thought*, 247.

16. Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), Kindle E-book edition, location 46.

ing, however, gender analysis and relative linguistic meaning of gendered expression and the power it articulates has been among Scott's greatest contribution to the discipline. Even more significant is Scott's ongoing critique of history and historiography. No longer is history complicit in the continuation of gendered hierarchy. No longer are historians uncritical of the assumptions and methods applied in their discipline. Instead, historians are now enlightened and influenced by a greater degree of interdisciplinary studies and a larger purview of history. Scott and her examinations of gender and linguistic analysis have also contributed to the establishment of women's studies programs. Despite the changing meaning of feminism and, according to Scott, the diminishment of its perceived value by the greater population, women's studies programs continue to "embrace feminism, not as a set of prescriptions but as a critical stance, one that seeks to interrogate and disrupt prevailing systems of gender...one that is committed to self-scrutiny as well as to denunciations of domination and oppression, one that is never satisfied with simply transmitting bodies of knowledge but that seeks instead to produce a new knowledge. This is feminism not as the perpetuation and protection of orthodoxy but feminism as a critique."¹⁷ This provides a description not only of women's studies programs but also of Scott's ever-changing discourse on history. Scott remains active in the discipline of history. She continues applying the same interrogation of gender systems. In addition, she maintains constant self-scrutiny, as is evident in her self-critical works, but also apparent in the evolution of her methods. Scott has certainly re-defined the landscape of history and provided an ever-changing, ever-critical examination of the past that seeks to empower "women," both as a collective and an individual, to enact political equality.

17. Joan Wallach Scott, *Women's Studies On the Edge* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2008), 6.