

The Politics of the Veil

Cécile LABORDE

The Politics of the Veil is an exemplary exercise in the critique of discourse, unearthing its intentional and subconscious meaning, and bringing to the surface its internal tensions and paradoxes; but the counter-discourse of toleration and recognition may turn out to be as problematic as the republican discourse of abstraction, denial and repression so eloquently criticised.

Recensé : *The Politics of the Veil*. Joan Wallach Scott. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-691-12543-5

This book will undoubtedly rank as one of the best Anglo-American critical commentaries on the *affaire du foulard* and the 2004 law banning religious signs in schools. Joan Scott is a distinguished historian of France, who displays a remarkable understanding of the complex layers of French political discourse and an ability to convey its internal tensions in enviably lucid prose. This outstanding book, along with that by the American anthropologist John Bowen (more ominously named *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*, Princeton University Press 2006), amply deserves the attention of French readers. Indeed, it should not fail to impress even the most militant advocates of the ban on headscarves, thanks to the (rare) balance it maintains between sympathetic reconstruction of, and critical distance towards, French republican political theory. Thus Scott is not content to rehearse the pieties of Anglo-American liberals rushing to castigate the intolerant and illiberal authoritarianism of republican politics. She takes the discourse of French republicanism – its commitment to individualism, secularism, immigrant integration, gender equality – seriously, and brilliantly

demonstrates how the wearing of the *hijab* at school was so problematic in France because it was interpreted as a threat to a cluster of core ‘national’ values. Ultimately, she suggests, the ban on *hijab* acted as a (literally) hysterical diversion from the profound problems faced by a French society fractured around class, race and gender. Such is, at any rate, is Scott’s conclusion. Yet in the process, she succeeds in providing a magisterial demonstration of the power of discourse – of the ways in which abstract ideas, when mediated through a vibrant political culture, can influence collective thinking and practice. Thus, in densely written yet clear chapters, she sheds light on the ways in which the multi-layered ideologies of (respectively) colonial assimilationism and racism; *laïcité* and secularism; individualism and anti-communitarianism, and gender equality have been mobilised to justify the ban on headscarves. Particularly acute are Scott’s analyses of the re-importation of the civilizing mission in post-colonial France, and of the crisis of authority within the French educational system. Throughout, in a sharp critique of the rhetoric of the ‘clash of civilizations’, she shows how Muslim culture has been erected as the ‘Other’ to French culture, and its demonization has served as reassurance about the universal, rational and timeless nature of ‘French’ values. Yet, however engagingly and persuasively written, none of this material is entirely original, and Scott explicitly draws on the work of such critics as Baubérot, Balibar, Gaspard, Khosrokhavar and Nordmann. More innovative is the chapter on sexuality – unsurprisingly given Scott’s extensive engagement, in her previous work, with the question of sexual difference in France and elsewhere. Scott squarely addresses an intriguing yet bizarrely overlooked theme in the *hijab* debates: what made girls wearing headscarves – a symbol of modesty and discretion in Islam – ‘ostentatious’ and ‘conspicuous’ in French discourse and perceptions? Scott is an expert in discursive paradoxes, as her first major book, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, on French feminists and the rights of man, demonstrated. Here she offers an incisive analysis of the way in which an ideal of ‘uncovered sexuality’, predicated on the availability of female bodies to the male gaze, underlay the republican critique of the ‘covered sexuality’ of Islam. She suggests that the republican ideal of transparency, sameness and equality dissimulates and denies, rather than abolishes, sexual difference. On this view, the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women was disturbing because it revealed, ‘ostentatiously’, what should best remain hidden – the social salience of sexual difference and sexuality. Scott’s book is an exemplary exercise

in the critique of discourse, unearthing its intentional and subconscious meaning, and bringing to the surface its internal tensions and paradoxes. Yet while Scott's critical analysis of the discourse about headscarves is exemplary, and its conclusions compelling, their normative premises and broader political implications remain unclear – a standard limitation of discourse analysis in general. Scott repeatedly argues that 'difference' should be recognised, embraced and negotiated, instead of being negated and oppressed. She successfully demonstrates that such moral and psychological disposition towards tolerance and openness should motivate the acceptance of Muslim headscarves in schools. Yet is the motto of the 'toleration' and the 'recognition' of difference likely to provide normative guidance for the solution of other pressing, and more serious, political problems raised by the *hijab* controversy? How much, and what kind of 'recognition' should the state provide to religious groups? What should the proper relationship between schools and religion be? Should Muslims be considered as a disadvantaged group and benefit from policies of affirmation action? How should the claims of sexual difference be fairly regulated? Which patriarchal practices, if any, should be combated? In the end, the counter-discourse of toleration and recognition may turn out to be as problematic as the republican discourse of abstraction, denial and repression which Scott so eloquently criticises.

Text published in laviedesidees.fr, 2008, january 30th

© laviedesidees.fr