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Secularism as a Liberal Ideal

(https://tocqueville21.com/author/tim-crane/)
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This is the first of four reviews of Joan Wallach Scott's Sex and Secularism. *To see the other reviews as well as Scott's reply, follow the link here. (https://tocqueville21.com/focus/focus-sex-and-secularism/)*

Sex and Secularism is a powerful historical polemic against one widespread picture of the relationship between secularism and gender equality. This picture is that the secularist tradition of thought has been historically associated with an egalitarian approach to gender—indeed, that these ideas somehow fit naturally together—and that therefore progress towards increasing secularization has also been progress for gender equality.

Scott argues that neither part this picture is correct. First, secularism actually arose out of a range of distinctions—private/public, political/religious, state/family etc.—which "had nothing in them of gender equality; rather they were marked by a presumption of gender inequality." And second, in many cases the growth of secularist ideas has not been good for women at all. In the case of Muslim women, a certain secularist tradition, which sees the veil as "the ultimate sign of women's lack of emancipation," has tended to tell women how they can and cannot appear in public—a situation which Scott illuminatingly compares to the sexualisation of Muslim women in earlier ages: "always deprived of individual agency, [the Muslim woman of the East] was first presented as the embodiment of wasteful sexuality, now as its unnatural repression."

Scott's compelling (and in many ways surprising) story reveals some of the hidden tensions in the actual secularist tradition. She points out that as it actually developed, secularism was not motivated by any aim to advance the position of women, despite the abstract statements of philosophers and politicians relating the doctrine to the ideal of freedom. On the contrary, the history of secularism is the history of a concept whose application implied the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Women were perceived to have a natural "propensity to religiosity" and so the advance of the secular state required women to stay out of politics. The "attribution of (dangerous or benign) religiosity to women" Scott claims, "was firmly in place in the discourses of republican France."

Scott is a historian of France, and many of her claims are best understood in terms of the French experience of the relationship between religion (especially Islam) and public life. When she writes that "in our current context secularism is portrayed as a practice threatened by the return of religion, specifically Islam," Scott must mean the "current context" to be that of contemporary France. Although Islam is seen as a "threat" in many Western countries, I suspect that only in France is secularism (as opposed to the "Western way of life" more vaguely) seen as the target. Indeed, vocal defenders of the "clash of civilisations" tend to see it the "clash" as between between Islam and Christianity, not secularism. This is true in the United States and the United Kingdom, as it is in other parts of Europe: the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example, has explicitly (and absurdly) portrayed himself as defending Christendom against the Muslim hordes clamouring at the border of the European Union.

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But the idea that the "Western way of life" presents women with the emancipation they lack under Islam can be a common element in these various anti-Islamic sentiments. Scott is surely right when she accuses Western secularism of a failure of imagination in being unable to envisage different forms of emancipation for Muslim women. The "proponents of a clash of civilisations refuse to acknowledge" that wearing the veil may be a manifestation of self-determination, "insisting instead that self-determination exists only on the secular side." They refuse to recognise that the veil may be part of a self-conception for those who seek "an alternative repertoire for self-fashioning and self-restraint by means of disciplinary practices, which ranges from supervision of the imperatives of faith and control of sexuality, both in mind and body" (in the words of Nilüfer Göle). The idea that the hundreds of millions of women who wear the veil are incapable of any kind of self-determination is a dangerous secularist myth.

Scott points out that "the persistence of gender asymmetry in the face of political transformation (revolution, constitutional amendments, laws enfranchising women) is a striking feature of modern nation states." However, it does not follow from the fact that gender asymmetry and inequality has persisted even in secularist states that secularism has made no difference to the position of women in those states. To establish this conclusion, we would need to know what the gender situation would have been without the secularist developments. How to establish such a counterfactual is of course a difficult matter, but at the very least we need to recognise the possibility that that secularist thinking may have been responsible for making the situation somewhat better for women than it might otherwise have been.

But what is secularist thinking, exactly? Scott says that secularism is "a polemical term put to work differently in different contexts," and its meaning is "perpetually and irresistibly open to change." This is true of course, but when we turn to some actual statements of secularist views, they seem to be simple statements of unexceptional liberal principles of tolerance and individual freedom. In their Secularism and Freedom of Conscience (2011) Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure claim that "respect for the moral equality of individuals and the protection of freedom of conscience and of religion constitute the two major aims of secularism today." Their claim resembles that of the French philosopher Henri Pena-Ruiz, that secularism is the "simultaneous affirmation of three values": freedom of conscience, the "full equality" of all believers, and "a concern for universality in the public sphere" (i.e. in the law). These ideas also are central in the conception of secularism (laïcité) embodied in the 1905 French law on the separation of Church and State, which emphasised freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. And they are also central to the Anglo-American tradition of religious freedom and religious tolerance, articulated by John Locke and enshrined in the American Bill of Rights.

Does a historical investigation like Scott's damage such a conception? The answer is not obvious. I write here as someone who has little sympathy with the French version of secularism (especially its recent implementations) or with things that go under the name of "humanism" in Britain and elsewhere. But nonetheless I believe that the principles of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience are very important. So it seems to me that one can defend these principles while accepting much of Scott's critique of (what we might call) "real existing" secularism.

Consider a rather extreme historical analogy. Democracy is widely held by liberals and others to be a political ideal worth defending when one has it, and worth striving for when one does not. Of course, there are different ideas of what democracy is, how it should operate and what the source of its value is—but let's take it for the time being as the idea that where certain decisions of the operation of the state are concerned, everyone's say is counted. Everyone should count for one and no more than one. When we say that certain states should become democracies, this is one of the things we mean.

But in its original form in ancient Athens, only adult male citizens who had completed military service could vote. That was only about 20% of the population: no slaves, no foreigners, and no women. Even as democracies developed, it took until the twentieth century to extend the franchise to most men, and even longer to women, starting with New Zealand in 1892 and gradually spreading throughout the century—Switzerland is notorious for not giving women the vote until 1971, and it is perhaps less

well known that the tiny principality of Liechtenstein only did so in 1984. Most states which claimed to be democracies for many decades did not respect the simple principle of every person counting for one.

These facts are well known, which does not stop them being important and interesting. But do they somehow undermine the value of democracy as an ideal? I don't think so. Precisely because it is an ideal, we can distinguish between its core meaning and its actual historical implementation. Scott herself makes something like this distinction when she says that she is talking about secularism as "political discourse, not a transcendent set of principles." All I want to emphasize here is that the principles can survive a critique like Scott's, insightful as it is. By this I do not mean only that they survive as mere abstract or transcendent ideas; as the example of democracy shows, the principles can still be practically applied, even if imperfectly.

The core of the ideal of democracy—that every person counts for one and no more—is one that has taken a painfully long time to realize in practice. This is not, in itself, an argument against the ideal, if we think the ideal is worth trying to achieve in the first place. Analogously, the core ideal behind secularism might indeed be freedom of conscience and religion, something which has taken a long time to achieve, and is now under threat again—as indeed Scott's own analysis shows.

What Scott's historical account does undermine is any self-congratulatory narrative of the kind, "look at us, look how great we are." The history of democracy has exemplified the democratic ideal to a very limited extent, and for this reason defenders of democracy in the West should check their temptation to preach at those who lack it. And a similar thing is true of secularism, as Scott shows very convincingly. She is right to point to the hypocrisy in some Western liberals' appeal to secularism in justification of their opposition to the position of women in Islam. But as the analogy with democracy suggests, the fact that a value has been appealed to by hypocrites who ignore that value elsewhere does not undermine the value itself. The fact that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 may have been defended by the appeal to "spreading democracy" does not undermine democracy as an ideal. Analogously, secularism, or, better, the ideals that lie behind it, may have value even if its discourse is employed by those who—whether cynically or not—use it to demean or inhibit others.

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