

Title—The Politics of the Veil
Author—Joan Wallach Scott
Year—2007

Categories: Islam, Immigration, Europe, Politics, Feminism

Place: France

Time: 1989-2005

Argument Synopsis:

Scott's *The Politics of the Veil* sets out to answer the question: what is it about the headscarf that makes it the focus of controversy and the sign of something intolerable in France? The book is centered on the debates that surrounded the passage of the 2004 law in France which banned headscarves (and other ostentatious religious symbols) from public schools. Scott chooses to focus on France in order to highlight the local nature of the imagined general conflict between Islam and the West. Without considering the local nuances of the context, Scott believes it is not possible to accurately grasp the situation of Muslim immigrants in Western Europe. Because she is concretely focused on the political debates surrounding the headscarf ban, there are not many Muslim voices included in the book because there were not many Muslim voices heard in the debates. Thus, it is not a book about French Muslims, but a book about the dominant French view of them. In terms of organization, Scott organizes the book around different issues with chapters covering racism, secularism, individualism, and sexuality. She acknowledges that all these issues are intertwined but chooses to engage with each separately.

The issue of the headscarf came to a head in France in the early twenty-first century, when debates over the permissibility of the headscarf dominates French discourse. This was paralleled across Western Europe, as former colonial subjects continued seeking a permanent place in the metropole bringing up questions of national identity across the region. Scott argues that unlike Catholicism, Islam is historically decentralized and the only thing that has established Muslims as a single community are the various laws in Europe that single them out and objectify them. In the French context, universalism is seen as the antithesis of communalism, i.e. the priority of group over national identity. The French desire for the sameness of all individuals can only be achieved by assimilating to the norms of its culture, not merely by swearing allegiance to the country. Headscarves were taken to be a violation of French secularism and a sign of the inherent non-Frenchness of Islam. The ban established the intention to keep France a unified nation—secular, individualist, and culturally homogenous. Scott reveals the conflation of the headscarf and veil in the language that dominated the debates, and claims it was a way of expressing the deep anxiety about the ways Islam is understood to handle the relations of the sexes. The veil in French republican discourse served to cover a body of intractable domestic issues even as it revealed the anxieties associated with them. Scott calls for the need for French politicians and intellectuals to come up with new ways of addressing difference, ways that acknowledge its existence rather than refusing to engage it.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Situation of Muslim immigrants in Western European countries can only be fully grasped by taking the local context into account
- The idea of the 'clash of civilizations' undermines the very democracy it is meant to promote
- Although headscarf law only targets schools, it has been taken as a general expression of official disapproval of the veil