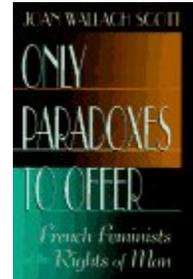


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joan Wallach Scott. *Only Paradoxes To Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. xiii + 229 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-63930-0.

Reviewed by David L. Schalk (Vassar College)
Published on H-France (December, 1996)



Those of us who have read and re-read, often assigned, and long admired Joan Scott's prize-winning first book, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux* (Harvard University Press, 1974), may have been surprised to see her carve out a reputation as a leading feminist historian. One might have expected her to have become an eminent social historian, probably focusing on the development of the modern industrial labor force. I went back and checked the index of *Glassworkers*, and there is only one woman listed, the early socialist organizer, Paule Minck. Minck is cited strictly for her political role in introducing socialism to Carmaux in 1882. Indeed, the word "feminism" does not appear in the index of *Glassworkers*.

Social history's loss is feminist history's gain, and Joan Scott has given us a book of extraordinary brilliance and lucidity. It is carefully structured, with a theoretical introduction, four substantive case studies that move effortlessly back and forth between theory and praxis, and an illuminating conclusion discussing the condition of Frenchwomen and of French feminism since women began to vote and to hold office in 1945 (though, and this is part of the paradox, their parliamentary representation has always been very small, even minuscule).

This work is a model of theoretically informed scholarship, setting up its arguments with clarity and concision. Scott has acquired an amazing command of the most abstruse theory, a command that a professional philosopher might well envy—and ought to imitate—in that she makes complex theoretical points with such precision and elegant simplicity that the layperson can follow her arguments without difficulty. On several occasions after reading a particularly succinct and luminously clear theoretical formulation, I went to her footnotes to see what philosopher she was relying on at that point in

her argument, and found a reference to the notoriously indecipherable Jacques Derrida!

Joan Scott lays out the central paradox she is determined to examine (but not resolve, since technically a paradox is unresolvable) so concisely that I quote it here:

Feminism was a protest against women's political exclusion; its goal was to eliminate 'sexual difference' in politics, but it had to make its claims on behalf of 'woman' (who were discursively produced through 'sexual difference'). To the extent that it acted for 'women,' feminism produced the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate. This paradox—the need both to accept and to refuse 'sexual difference'—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history (pp. 3-4).

On one level Scott's book is a history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French feminism, an always interesting, often moving account of the efforts of a series of brilliant, energetic, determined French women to acquire political rights. None of her principal characters lived to see their primordial goal of suffrage realized. Scott's most recent subject, Madeleine Pelletier, died in 1939, five years before the Committee of National Liberation, then based in Algiers, issued an ordinance enfranchising women. Hence one of the key questions Scott addresses in her work (subsumed under the generic or all-encompassing paradox discussed above), is to explain the "repetitious quality of their [the feminists] actions" (p. 3).

Joan Scott began her project with a study of Olympe de Gouges, who in a statement of 1788—describing herself as a "woman who has only paradoxes to offer and not problems easy to resolve"—provided Scott with her

marvelous title. As is well known, the elusive and imaginative but obviously in the end deadly serious de Gouges paid with her life in 1793 for her early feminist writing and political action. Scott's discussion of de Gouges is subtly combined with a concise articulation of the beginnings of feminism in France. After completing her study of de Gouges, Scott decided to continue the "deconstruction of the 'equality versus difference' opposition," and "began to think about which other feminists... [to] include in such a book" (p. xii).

I would have been fascinated to know a little more about Joan Scott's thought processes, and why she made the choices she did. After de Gouges, who is deservedly a central figure whom one could not imagine ignoring, Scott decided to write about Jeanne Deroin, Hubertine Auclert, and Madeleine Pelletier. Did she select these three remarkable feminists because of the threads that join them? Jeanne Deroin explicitly and consciously linked her political activities in 1848 with Olympe de Gouges's campaign for women's rights during the first Revolution and Republic. Hubertine Auclert admired Deroin and wrote to her in London in 1886, where Deroin had been living in exile since 1851. Pelletier in turn was involved with Auclert, joining with the older woman in militant suffragist action, invading polling places in 1908. I rather suspect that different threads leading back to Olympe de Gouges and forward to the twentieth century would be found with a different sequence of feminists.

Why, for example, did Joan Scott decide *not* to write about Flora Tristan, Louise Michel, and Maria Verone, to take another remarkable and roughly synchronous trio? And if Joan Scott had picked my alternative trio, could their private experience and public action be "read" according to Scott's theoretical model, which works so well for the case histories she selected? I rather think they could, but would be most interested in Scott's view.

Joan Scott's concluding chapter, "Citizens but Not Individuals: The Vote and After," helps us understand why

Claude Servan-Schreiber could claim in 1992 that essentially nothing had happened for women since the granting of suffrage. Scott begins by listing a series of reasons, each of them convincing, as to why the Free French government in exile of General de Gaulle decided to enfranchise women in 1944. I would simply add one reason to round out the explanation. How could full civil rights be denied to those who had shared in the trauma and pain of the Occupation and so willingly joined the Resistance? Though the particular case I mention below could not have been known when the decision to grant suffrage was made, many others were.

In Dijon on a comfortable stone school building on the rue Condorcet (coincidentally the only Enlightenment figure who was a feminist, a friend of Olympe de Gouges, and like her a victim of the Terror), one may read the following plaque:

_Lycee Marcelle Parde

Honneur et Patrie

A la memoire de Marcelle Parde Directrice du Lycee (1935-1945) Et de Simone Plessis sa Secretaire Officiers des Forces Francaises Combattantes Deportees en Allemagne et Mortes a Ravensbruck (janvier 1945-mars 1945) Un pays vit tant que ses enfants sont prets a mourir pour lui._

I would hope that Joan Scott's marvelous book will soon be translated into French, so that the current generation of students at the Lycee Marcelle Parde, and many others, both men and women, will have a better understanding of the "reasons for the intractability of the dilemmas [French] feminists have confronted and for the necessarily paradoxical responses to them they continue to have" (p. 174).

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://www.uakron.edu/hfrance/>

Citation: David L. Schalk. Review of Scott, Joan Wallach, *Only Paradoxes To Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. December, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=745>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.