IJTIHAD JOURNAL
for Islamic and Arabic Studies

Volume 1 - Issue 1, January - June 2024
مجلد 1 - عدد 1، يناير – يونيو 2024

The Politics of the Veil[1]

Joan Wallach Scott

سياسة الحجاب

جوان ولاش سكوت

IJTIHAD CENTER
FOR STUDIES AND TRAINING

Reviewed by: Dennis O. van Dijk
* Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies
KU Leuven
d.o.vandijk@outlook.com

مراجعة: الأستاذ دينيس فان دايك[2]
* كلية اللاهوت والدراسات الدينية، جامعة لوفان في بلجيكا

Date received: Jan 11, 2024
Date revised: Jan 23, 2024
Date accepted: Mar 5, 2024
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12549454

جوان والاش سكوت، **سياسة الحجاب**، مطبعة جامعة برنستون، نيوجيرسي، 2007. مقدمة + ص 208.
Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. xii + 208 pp.
ISBN 978–0–691–12543–5

[1] **To cite this article:**
Dijk, Dennis O. van, Review of Joan Wallach Scott's Book: The Politics of the Veil, Ijtihad Center for Studies and Training, Belgium, Vol. 1, Issue 1, June 2024, 319-324.
دينيس فان دايك، مراجعة لكتاب جوان ولاش سكوت: سياسة الحجاب، مركز اجتهاد للدراسات والتكوين، بلجيكا، مج. 1، ع. 1، يونيو 2024، 319-324.

[2] حاصل على الماستر البحثي من جامعة أمستردام في هولندا، وماستر في الأدب والثقافة من جامعة ليدن في هولندا، ويحضر ماستر آخر في الأديان العالمية والدراسات الإسلامية من جامعة لوفان في بلجيكا.

Over two decades have passed since the release of John Wallach Scott's seminal work, *The Politics of the Veil*, in 2007. In this enduring piece, Scott explores the intricate discourse surrounding the Islamic veil/headscarf, a topic that has consistently fueled heated debates in France since the late 1990s. The relevance of Scott's work remains unquestionable, as it continues to resonate amidst a backdrop of significant global developments. The landscape has been marked by pivotal events such as the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2014, the profound impact of the Charlie Hebdo shooting in 2015, the implementation of travel restrictions targeting citizens from predominantly Muslim nations by the Trump administration, the controversial Qur'an burnings by right-wing extremist quasi-politicians leading to the Turkish blockage of Sweden's NATO membership, and, most notably, the ongoing migration crisis. The latter has seen a substantial influx of both economic migrants and refugees into various European nations, intensifying an already polarized political debate. Within this evolving context, in the summer of 2023, on the cusp of a new school year, France again found itself at the center of global attention, as President Emmanuel Macron announced a policy that banned Islamic Abayas in public schools, a move that immediately resulted in the expulsion of 90 French schoolgirls. As we navigate these contemporary developments, John Wallach Scott's enduring work beckons for a renewed and thoughtful reconsideration.

In this work, Scott poses the fundamental questions: "Why the headscarf? What is it about the headscarf that makes it the focus of controversy, the sign of something intolerable?" (3). The simplistic answers offered by French politicians and some feminists posit that the veil is an emblem of radical Islamist politics and that it symbolizes the oppression of women. Intertwined with these notions is the issue of the perceived threat of communalism to French universalism, its celebrated antithesis. French universalism insists that the sameness of all individuals forms the basis of equality. Hence, France strives for the eradication of differences by assimilating its citizens into a singular culture and political ideology, namely that of French republicanism. The origins of this paradigm trace back to the French Revolution of 1789 when the walls of monasticism were both literally and symbolically dismantled, paving the way for the emergence of French secularism, known as *laïcité*. This concept signifies the separation of church and state, safeguarding individuals from the intrusion of religious influence by relegating it to the private sphere. In this light, Muslim headscarves are viewed as a violation

of *laïcité* and everything that France stands for. But Scott contends that this surface analysis does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. To unearth the roots of this complex matter, she undertakes a Foucauldian analysis of the political discourse within the French republican framework, probing issues of racism, gender, and sexuality.

Before delving into this examination, Scott guides us through three pivotal moments in the emergence of the *affaires des foulards*—in 1989, 1994, and 2003. The first incident unfolded on October 3, 1989, when three Muslim girls, who staunchly refused to remove their headscarves, were expelled from a middle school near Paris by principal Eugène Chenière, invoking the principle of *Laïcité*. According to Chenière, *laïcité* was not merely a conceptual framework but an inviolable and transparent principle, a foundational element of republican universalism, with the school serving as its cradle—an environment in which the values of the French Republic were nurtured and ingrained. The clash between the three girls and the principal rapidly escalated into a media sensation, tapping into the broader issue of growing societal unease concerning the place of former colonized migrants from the Maghreb countries within French society. As the controversy unfolded, voices of moderation and reason gradually receded, overshadowed by mounting hysteria fueled by media manipulation and culturally insensitive "intellectuals." This state of affairs persisted until November 27 when the Conseil d'État ruled that the wearing of symbols of religious affiliation by students in public schools was not inherently incompatible with *Laïcité*, as long as these symbols were neither ostentatious nor polemical, did not involve proselytism, and did not infringe upon the liberties of other students. Given the vagueness of these criteria, the council concluded that teachers and school administrators were best equipped to interpret and enforce these guidelines.

After a period of relative calm, in 1994, Chenière, who had since leveraged his career on the backs of the three girls and had now become a representative of the center-right party, Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), initiated another crusade. This time, he proposed a bill with the objective of banning all "ostentatious" signs of religious affiliation. On September 20, 1994, the Minister of Education, François Bayrou, issued a decree prohibiting such signs in public schools. Bayrou argued that certain symbols inherently constituted acts of proselytism. 69 girls were expelled, and the controversy once again subsided. Fast forward to 2003, in the aftermath of 9/11 and during the zenith of the right-wing extremist Front

National's influence in 2002. At this juncture, the Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, mandated that Muslim women must pose bare-headed for official identity photographs. This reignited calls to outlaw headscarves in public schools, prompting President Jacques Chirac to establish the Stasi commission to explore the feasibility of enacting a law. The media's attention shifted to the "rebellious" sisters Alma and Lila Lévy, both converts to Islam. Their case held particular interest because they hailed from a background steeped in *laïcité* values and experienced no familial pressure to wear the hijab; quite the opposite. Since the argument of oppression did not apply in this instance, their case was wielded to illustrate that Islam had the potential to supplant even a secular upbringing. In March 2004, the headscarf ban in public schools became law, and enforcement commenced in October of the same year. This legislative action effectively cast those practicing Islam as outsiders to the French way of life.

Scott's analysis highlights that within the discourse of French republicanism, the veil is often viewed through a lens tinged with racism. Erecting a barrier against the wearing of the veil not only serves to distinguish Islam but also to underscore the differences embodied by Arab and Muslim communities. It becomes a means of asserting the presumed superiority of French "civilization" amid a rapidly evolving global landscape. This colonialist perspective inevitably intersects with the concept of *laïcité*, creating a stark juxtaposition between French secular and egalitarian progressiveness and a portrayal of Muslim communities as entrenched in religious fundamentalism, oppression, and inequality. Advocates of the headscarf ban often positioned themselves as champions of emancipation, contending, despite contradictory evidence, that girls wearing headscarves were either victims of familial pressures or manipulated by radical political Islamists. In contrast, the girls themselves and many opponents of the law argued that the headscarf may indeed represent an expression of individual conviction. However, lawmakers steadfastly maintained that this could not logically be the case. They asserted that, by definition, the headscarf symbolized submission, a renunciation of individuality, and an unequivocal declaration of one's primary allegiance to communal norms and obligations. Opposing the headscarf ban was construed as a challenge to the republic's immutable principles, a perceived threat to the very existence of the nation. What particularly struck Scott, however, were the "sexual connotations" inherent in the

language used by lawmakers and, consequently, the complex sexual implications intertwined with the entire issue.

The law that prohibited headscarves in public schools made a clear distinction between acceptable *discreet* signs of religious conviction and unacceptable *conspicuous* signs. Scott astutely directs our attention to the significance of this choice of words. She discerns that when the term "conspicuous" is applied, particularly in relation to a woman's body, it carries connotations of erotic provocation. In contrast, "discreet" suggests neutrality and a lack of attention-seeking behavior, almost asexuality. This linguistic dichotomy not only reinforced the law's philosophical disapproval of headscarves as a violation of *laïcité* but also subtly hinted at unacceptable sexual undertones. The law implied that there was something sexually amiss about girls wearing headscarves, a paradox where both too little and too much was being revealed. But in what way was there "too much"? According to the girls wearing headscarves, it was a symbol of modesty and sexual unavailability. In Islamic culture, women were perceived as objects of male desire, and modest dress was intended to mitigate any potential arousal. Scott takes a thought-provoking turn, contending that it was not the absence of sexuality, but its presence, that the law was addressing. This presence was emphasized by the girls' refusal to conform to what was considered "normal" interactions with members of the opposite sex. For French observers, the veil carried a disconcerting sexual connotation stemming from its role in a gender system they perceived as radically different from their own.

Islam's recognition of the complexities of sexuality revealed more about the limitations of the French system than the French were willing to admit. In this context, Scott references sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar's terminology, distinguishing "open" systems from "covered" (e.g., Islamic) ones. This highlights the inherent voyeurism and exhibitionism in open systems where the body's language centers around accessibility to the opposite sex. The French system of gender relations was not just portrayed as superior but as the sole acceptable way to organize relations between sexes. French republicans regarded the veil as inherently alienating women, not only from their fundamental rights but also from their own sexuality. In a provocative twist, Scott suggests that the ultimate aim was to bring Muslim women in line with their French counterparts, granting them the freedom "to display their bodies and experience the joys of sex—as French society (women and men) understood them" (162).

Interestingly, before their ideological clash with Islam, many French feminists criticized their society's sexual exhibitionism for objectifying women, reducing them to mere physical bodies. However, amid the fervor of the headscarf controversy and a surge in nationalist sentiment, these concerns were temporarily sidelined. Equality became synonymous with sexual liberation, which, in turn, was equated with the visibility of the female body, prompting many French feminists to champion the emancipation of Muslim women.

Scott's analysis of the headscarf debate and its relation to *laïcité* undeniably exposes the absurdity surrounding this contentious issue. Through her meticulous examination of historical events fueling this debate, she reveals the vulnerabilities in French republicanism's resolute universalist agenda. However, within her exploration of the veil's sexualization, Scott occasionally leans toward an overly polarizing perspective. While she defends this polarization as an examination of "idealized" gender systems and their representation (154), it ultimately creates a stark dichotomy. Women are portrayed as either catering to the 'male gaze' with revealing attire or adopting complete coverage, leaving little room for nuanced expressions of identity. This polarization mirrors Scott's own position within the debate, firmly rooted in a specific political spectrum. Nonetheless, despite the book's publication date limitations, Scott's work seamlessly intersects with the contemporary context of the migration crisis. The French insistence on preserving "eighteenth-century" *laïcité* principles in the face of a rapidly evolving multicultural landscape remains a pertinent concern. Just as the French Revolution dismantled monasticism's walls to make way for *laïcité*, the current era of multiculturalism challenges the essence of this concept. Our world is evolving, and societies worldwide grapple with inevitable transformations as cultural minorities have the potential to become majorities. Instead of clinging to the ruins of obsolete systems and cultures, a forward-looking approach is imperative. Adapting to an increasingly globalized and diverse world is essential for creating a livable environment for all. This pivotal argument, though not fully developed in Scott's work, underscores the enduring relevance of *The Politics of the Veil*. It serves as a testament to the book's timeless significance, encouraging us to navigate the intricacies of our ever-changing, pluralistic world.