

Language, Experience, and Identity

Joan W. Scott's Theoretical Challenge to Historical Studies

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This article highlights some of Joan W. Scott's theoretical challenges to historical studies over the past two decades. This period has seen not only a theoretical and conceptual renovation of historical research, but also the increasing visibility of a new movement in historiography. Scott has been one of its most important architects because of her challenge to the way we approach such basic concepts as experience, objectivity, causality, and the subject of history.

The paradigm of social history used to be based on the assumption that reality is an objective entity and that therefore the consciousness, identity, and actions of historical subjects are determined by the material conditions of their existence. From that point of view, the subjectivity and behavior of people are the expression and effect of their experience of reality, which means that the subject is conscious of meanings already embedded in reality. According to this view, the language people use to refer to the world they inhabit and even to their place in that world—indeed, the language by which they define their identities and interests and give expressive form to their beliefs—is a means of recognizing and enunciating an objective reality. Affirming the objective nature of social reality, considering consciousness and culture as representations and reflections of an objective world, and explaining the signifying practice of historical subjects as the result of a causal determination of that reality, have served as fundamental theoretical assumptions of social history.

Nevertheless, in recent years each one of these theoretical assumptions, so rooted in the common sense of historiography, has been subject to ongoing

discussion and critical revision; as a result, an alternative explanatory model, based on new theoretical premises, has begun to take shape.¹ This new *post-social history* questions the notion that social and material reality is an objective entity on the model outlined above and can, therefore, causally determine the conduct of historical actors. In this account, language is not merely a means of representing reality, but also operates as a system of signification that intervenes actively in the production of meanings attributed to the real world and through which practice is organized and its meanings established. Language is not merely a repertoire or set of resources from which a subject draws, but it is also discourse, that is, a series of culturally bound conceptual means of perceiving, apprehending, and making intelligible the very notion of historical context. Consequently, linguistic concepts not only designate reality in a way that is presumptively referential, but also contribute to constructing our image of that reality, making that image inseparable from the reality itself. Therefore, they influence the way in which we experience the world and the place we have in it.

Joan Scott's work has been seminal in compelling a critical revision of the objectivist paradigm and in reconstructing theoretically the field of history. Her main contribution lies in particular in problematizing and reformulating three cornerstone notions of historical research: language, experience, and identity. Regarding the first notion, Scott argues that language is not simply a means for the transmission and representation of reality, but that it is an effective system of signification. In her view, it is crucial to avoid any confusion between "language" and "words," because language is not to be understood as mere vocabulary or as a codifiable set of grammatical rules; rather, language is a system that constitutes meanings.² It is a system "through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices organized and by which, accordingly, people represent and understand their world, including who they are and how they relate to others."³ Such a notion of language, Scott underscores, cannot be grasped through the conventional opposition between idealism, concerned solely with ideas we may have about social relations, and materialism, understood as the relations themselves, for it refers to the way in which social relations themselves are maintained and conceived. Given that to understand how these relations are conceived entails a comprehension of how they work, language becomes a starting point to understand "how institutions are organized, how relations of production are experienced, and how collective identity is established."⁴ For this reason, argues Scott, if in historical inquiry we consider words as mere literary embellishments, we lose the chance to understand how meaning is constructed; such an inquiry may use language to ornament or facilitate the augmentation of new knowledge but would not lead

to a transformation of “the way in which we think about the history we write” (“OL,” 1).

This theoretical position in Scott’s work is the basis of her groundbreaking critique of Gareth Stedman Jones’s interpretation of Chartism, for example. For Stedman Jones, Chartism was not a result or an expression of the socioeconomic situation of the members of the Chartist movement, but a phenomenon that was developed within the political sphere and was, therefore, causally independent of the socioeconomic situation. What Scott criticizes in Stedman Jones is his use of a conventional understanding of politics as consisting of a set of ideas; as a result, he conceives of language at face value, simply as texts that reflect the world transparently, without attending to the way in which the meaning of those texts, and of reality itself, has been constructed. Stedman Jones limits himself to rendering a version of the subject of class who is wholly independent of its socioeconomic context, without examining the way in which the Chartists’ consciousness and identity were built up through a particular system of historical meaning. As Scott puts it, “by reading language only thematically,” Stedman Jones arrives at the conclusion that Chartism is a political movement, because it was interested in expanding formal political representation as a solution to social problems. The key to Chartism, he says, was its use of a radical “vocabulary,” the importation of older words and ideas into an early nineteenth-century context. Ultimately, says Scott, what Stedman Jones claims is that historians of Chartism have not understood causal relations properly when they argue that it was “state policies” and not the “relations of production” that determined “the composition and the goals of the movement.” In sum, Scott believes that what Jones does is transfer causality from the economic sphere to the political one. Although vocabulary plays a role in the attribution of historical efficacy to the political sphere, the role of language remains underestimated and misunderstood. Scott objects that this is not a novel assertion, nor a major transformation of how we think about history, because it is still centered on the specific words people used, rather than on the “materiality of language itself.” That is, it continues to treat “language simply as a vehicle for communicating ideas rather than as a system of meaning or process of signification” (“OL,” 4–6).

To arrive at a significant reorientation of historical studies, argues Scott, it is necessary instead to adopt the notion that language reveals entire systems of meaning. According to this notion, language not only refers to how people think about concrete subjects, but to the way people conceive the very differentiating relations that organize the human world—either in terms of hierarchy or interdependence, or as a binary structure “built on oppositions between, say, good and evil, or wet and dry, or dependent and independent, or

male and female. It is particularly important to adopt the understanding that language intervenes in the construction of social identities, in this case, of class identity” (“OL,” 4–6).

Thus, to reiterate, Scott asserts that language operates not as a transparent means of communication but as *discourse*, understood not as words or phrases but as entire forms of thought, as ways of understanding how the world works, and one’s place in that world. According to Scott, discourse “is not a language or a text but a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs.”⁵ This definition has two implications: First, it is not possible to separate language from “real life,” or from the meaning of our experience, because language in this sense is inextricably bound to both; second, every meaning *is built* through a process of differentiation (not of referentiality); words acquire their meanings through contrasts with other words, and the relevant contrasts are, in turn, established within specific discursive fields.⁶ As Scott puts it, “positive definitions depend on negatives, indeed imply their existence in order to rule them out.” We are faced with a “kind of interdependence [that] has ramifications well beyond literal definitions for it involves other concepts, other relationships in any particular usage” (“OL,” 6).

Thus, language constitutes a system of meaning and, consequently, the meanings that belong to reality depend upon the particular discursive categories we use. This has profound implications for further specifying the other two notions at stake: experience and identity. Before addressing the question of experience, I shall indicate briefly that, for Scott, identity, like any other meaningful notion, emerges through the mediation of its established categories. This is so, Scott argues, because for people to identify themselves in a particular way, that concept of identity must have *already* existed. Concepts like class “are required before individuals can identify themselves as members of such a group, before they can act collectively as such” (“RC,” 41). Therefore, concepts and categories such as class, worker, citizen, man, and woman, should be the starting point for any historical research aimed at explaining the formation of subjects and their practices.⁷

This view of language presupposes the elimination of any notion of objective reality, the cornerstone of social history. If language is understood as a system of meaning and not a transparent label reflecting real phenomena, then the phenomena do not carry intrinsic meaning that language simply registers and conveys and upon which consciousness merely reflects. Rather, the meanings emerge when a set of discursive conceptions of the world forms those phenomena. On this basis, Scott poses her critique of the notion of *experience*. Her critique begins with the premise that we do not have direct access

to the reality we perceive, observe, or intend but that knowledge occurs through a series of prior categorical assumptions about the workings of reality. This is the case even when the observer makes use of a kind of language, such as numerical signs, that is intended to be totally neutral and transparent. Scott has, for example, focused on statistics and criticized the assumption that statistical data is the objective representation of social reality. From the nineteenth century on, she argues, statistical studies, with their numeric presentation of social data, became the foundation for the analysis of social reality and were used to justify the objectivity of such analysis. Facts and figures served as a kind of self-evident truth widely accepted by historians. As a result, historians have evaded the question of the relationship between reality and representation posed by the numerical sign system.⁸

Statistics do not merely reproduce reality; they organize its meaning. Statistical reports, Scott says, “are neither totally neutral collections of facts nor simply ideological impositions. Rather they are ways of establishing the authority of certain visions of social order, of organizing perceptions of ‘experience.’ At least since the eighteenth century, numbers have been used to establish the authenticity of interpretive or organizational categories” (*GPH*, 115). For instance, in reference to the case Scott studies that involves industrial statistics in Paris in the years 1847–1848, a number of established assumptions about human reality determine the way that data are collected, analyzed, and presented. These assumptions lead to taking certain phenomena as natural or objective, and thus presumed uncritically as the units of analysis. This clearly happens with the notion of “family.” Population statistics are collected according to “households”—rather than, say, villages or workplaces. According to Scott, this procedure “reveals and constructs a certain vision of social organization based on a particular idea of the family that is ‘naturalized’ in the course of presenting the data” (*GPH*, 115). Consequently, what makes these statistical reports interesting and fascinating is not the data they yield about social reality, but the categories and assumptions on which they are based and which form a particular image of reality. These statistics, in sum, are more revealing about the way their authors and users perceive reality than they are about reality itself. And this is why, insists Scott, when historians use statistics without questioning their underlying categories and interpretations, they end up perpetuating and naturalizing that same version of reality. Instead, a critical approach ought to situate each document in its “discursive context” and read it “not as a reflection of some external reality but as an integral part of that reality, as a contribution to the definition or elaboration of meaning, to the creation of social relationships, economic institutions, and political structures” (*GPH*, 137–138). That is, historians must begin to unearth the

terms by which these documents build up a version of reality and contribute “to constructing the ‘reality’ of the past” (*GPH*, 138).

Questioning the objective character of reality and its representations leads Scott to criticize the concept of *experience*, given that it presupposes an objective reality directly experienced by subjects. Contrary to conventional belief, people do not experience reality as bearing objective properties subsequently registered in their consciousness. Rather, people confer a particular meaning on reality according to the discursive categories at their disposal. In her reply to Bryan Palmer, for whom “the meaning of an event is inherent in the event itself,” Scott writes that “experience may be a problematic concept.” Contrary to Palmer’s view that experience is the basis of our perception of reality, Scott disputes the notion that anything exists as an unmediated experience of reality. This critique has direct bearing on how historians describe the experience of class struggle. Every experience of the world—inasmuch as it is a way of apprehending meaning—is mediated by a specific discourse (or discourses) and thus cannot exist outside that discursive mediation. Moreover, such mediation not only shapes one’s perception of reality, but is projected into people’s conduct, into their practices, and into institutions, materializing itself in ways of living (“RC,” 39).

Thus in her critique of the concept of experience, Scott starts out from two premises. The first is that reality does not consist of transparently available objects on the basis of which consciousness forms representations. The second premise is that language and experience are so inextricably tied together that we cannot separate the object from its linguistic representation. No experience exists outside language. Consequently, neither experience nor language can be analyzed separately from one another. This is why, for Scott, it is absurd to establish an antithesis between “rhetorical text” and “social experience,” as Christine Stansell proposes. Doing so reduces language to words or to written documents and effaces its shaping power; this leads to an impoverished theoretical framework for the study of history (“RC,” 40).

An inadequate conception of experience can be found, according to Scott, in the work of historians who, in dealing with questions of gender and homosexuality, restrict themselves to rescuing subjects from the silence to which dominant history has condemned them. Often these historians fail to question the conceptual foundations of history; they intend to complete the historical picture by giving visibility to those who were formerly excluded and effaced. But they continue to base their work “on the authority of experience” and to conceive of experience as an expression of reality.⁹ This is why this kind of historical study yields such contradictory results. On the one hand, it provides good data about the lives of people otherwise omitted or forgotten.

But in so doing, it leads to a crisis of orthodox ways of writing history, not only by multiplying histories and subjects, but also by revealing that history can be written from various perspectives, all of which are partial and none of which, taken separately, is entirely “true.” On the other hand, this challenge to normative history is performed within the framework of a conventional understanding of experience—what Scott calls “positivism”—according to which reality imposes itself on consciousness. This leads her to conclude that this way of writing a history of difference, aimed at documenting the experience of the other, has been both successful and limiting. “It has been successful because it remains so comfortably within the disciplinary framework of history, working according to rules that permit calling old narratives into question when new evidence is discovered.” It has been limiting because it continues to depend on “a referential notion of evidence which denies it is anything but a reflection of the real” (“EE,” 776).

It is precisely this referential claim to reality, “this kind of appeal to experience as incontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation on which analysis is based—that seriously weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference.” Staying within the epistemological framework of “orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place” (“EE,” 777). That is, these studies miss the opportunity to examine critically the theoretical assumptions that led to the exclusion of those subjects and, hence, they miss the opportunity to theoretically reorient the study of history. In this way, the histories of the “hidden” world of homosexuality, for example, show the impact of silence and repression on the lives of those affected and shed light on the history of their suppression, but the project of rendering the experience visible impedes the critical examination of the operation of the very categories of representation—homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman—as well as of notions of subject, origin, and cause (“EE,” 778). In fact, argues Scott, the main limitation of those histories is that they take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience they try to document and rescue, contributing to the naturalization of difference. Situating the subjects and their resistance independently of their discursive construction and taking experience as the ground of knowledge eliminates the possibility of questioning the constructed character of experience and the constitution of subjects themselves. The consequence is that “the evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.” Consequently, this “evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility

or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent,” presupposes that historical facts speak for themselves and that oppositions such as homosexuality vs. heterosexuality are naturally given (“EE,” 777, 778).

According to this way of doing history, homosexuality is presented as an expression of naturally given desire, a desire that is denied or repressed by a society that only recognizes heterosexuality. Nonetheless, the argument continues, homosexual desire cannot be repressed once and for all, “because experience is there,” and therefore it will be recognized sooner or later. According to this vision, emancipation is a teleological history in which desire finally wins over social control and becomes visible. History is thereby reduced to a chronology that makes experience visible. In this version the categories—desire, homosexuality, heterosexuality, femininity, masculinity, or sex—name realities that are considered ahistorical, natural, and objective. As a result, concludes Scott, this type of historical inquiry seeks to render experience visible, allows an appreciation of alternative forms of conduct and repressive actions, but accounts neither for the framework of—historically contingent—patterns of sexuality from which that experience emerged, nor for the conduct and action in which they are inscribed, nor for the logic they follow (“EE,” 778, 779).

A similar conception of experience, and a similar connection between reality and consciousness, can frequently be found in women’s history, according to Scott. When the relationship between thought and experience is conceived as if it were transparent, the life experience of women is seen as directly conducive to resisting oppression, that is, conducive to feminism. In other words, the identity of women and their political action is cast as the natural result of “a pre-existing women’s experience” (“EE,” 786–7). This is Scott’s criticism of Laura Lee Downs. Downs limits herself to applying the categories of difference as if they were a transparent expression of reality and experience, without analyzing the process through which such categories are constituted and how they actively take part in the construction of women’s identity.¹⁰

Thus, whether in the case of homosexuality, of gender, or of class, the above-mentioned historians, according to Scott, mask the “necessarily discursive character” of experience. That is, they fail to see that experience is not the result of reality’s direct impact on people’s subjectivity, but rather is the result of a discursive apprehension of reality. Experience, writes Scott, “is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside established meanings)” (“EE,” 793). Therefore, it does not follow, from the fact that every consciousness is tied to a particular historical context, that consciousness originates in experience and that, therefore, experience should be taken as a basis for the historical explanation. Rather, it is experience itself that *ought to be explained by historians*.

What has to be explained is why people have experienced themselves and their position in the world in a particular way. For Scott, it is crucial “to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences,” because “it is not individuals who have experiences, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (“EE,” 779). Thus—as I have already indicated—for the explanation of identity and the conduct of historical actors, we should look to the historical constitution of categories such as class, worker, citizen, man or woman, homosexual or heterosexual, as well as the way those categories enter into social practice—and not in the allegedly foundational experience (*GPH*, 3–4).

The critical reformulation of the concept of experience leads to a new notion of *identity*. The most important aspect of this reformulation is that Scott rebels against any essentialist, static, ahistorical, or objectivist account of identities. As a consequence, she also resists explaining identity as something achieved through the process of coming to consciousness. As she puts it, experience is not a set of objective circumstances that condition identity, and identity is not a sense of the self objectively determined or defined by needs and interests. Consequently, “politics is not the collective coming to consciousness of similarly situated individual subjects.” Rather politics is “the process by which plays of power and knowledge constitute identity and experience” (*GPH*, 5). According to this view, identities and experiences are variable phenomena discursively organized in particular contexts or configurations.

This theoretical premise has consequences for Scott’s studies of the subject of feminism. Scott denies that “woman” is a natural subject and thus universal and ahistorical. As a corollary, she rejects the notion that women, as women, and because of their natural condition as women, have a particular experience of the world and of their position in it. In fact, when operating within a notion of *women’s experience*, women’s contemporary experience gets naturalized and projected transhistorically, that is, beyond any one historical period. On these grounds, Scott criticizes the idea that women acquire an identity for themselves through an experience that is unmediated by cultural concepts, because that view will “always . . . end up in essentialism” by turning the body into the common element of shared womanhood (“RC,” 42). Even though this new conception of identity is entirely applicable to the case of women, the historicization of women’s identity faces greater difficulties compared to other identities, since it seems to be based on an incontrovertible natural reality. It is more difficult, states Scott, “to historicize the category of women, based as it seems to be in biology,” than, for instance, “to historicize the category of worker, always understood to be a social phenomenon, produced

not by nature, but by economic and political arrangements.” That explains exactly why an essentialist and naturalist notion of women is at work in a large part of women’s history and that, as a consequence, such historical inquiries tend to be guided by the goal of showing that women are capable (e.g., of participating in political life), instead of analyzing the changing character of women’s identity, the process through which that identity is constituted, and what possibilities for change open up within that process. That is, the difficulty of historicizing the category of woman explains the tendency “to pile up counter examples as demonstrations of women’s political capacity,” while not attending to “the changing, and often radically different, historical contexts within which women as subjects came into being.”¹¹

In fact, for a long time the history of women was driven by the goal of rescuing women from their historical invisibility, highlighting their abilities and the major roles played by women as writers, artists, politicians, and so on. In this way, feminist historians contributed to establishing “women’s presence” and participation in historical events, contrary to the exclusively masculinist history that prevailed at the time and was held responsible for making women invisible. According to Scott, however, this kind of history tends to operate on the basis of an essentialist notion of women—that is, to treat women as fixed and atemporal subjects. In the past, says Scott, there was a tendency to designate women as “us,” as if there were a solidaristic women’s identity that existed over time. This happened despite the fact that this *recuperation* of past women inevitably revealed numerous differences among women that called for recognition and explanation. Thus, the “specificity and diversity” of historical evidence came into contradiction with the uniform and ahistorical notion of woman.¹² As a result, as Scott argues, “the desire to legitimize feminist claims about women in order to consolidate an effective feminist political movement treats ‘women’ uniformly, and therefore, ahistorically. But the creation of women as subjects of history places them temporally in the contexts of their action, and explains the possibilities for such action in terms of those contexts.” Thus, “history contains examples of fundamental differences, in experience and self-understanding, among women, potentially undermining the political task of creating an enduring common identity.”

Consequently, the question of whether the category of “women” is singular or diverse, preexisting, or historical, is at the heart of both feminist history and the history of feminism. It is a tension between an essentialist and a historical notion of “woman” that generates a contradiction between a feminism that tends to establish a stable and permanent female subject and a feminist history that seeks to account for the historical diversity of identities by means of studying the different contexts in which women have lived. This

latter history shows that the identities attributed to and manifested by women change over time and from one society to another. Thus, except for the similarity of their sexual organs, it is hard to find a common identity between, for instance, aristocratic *salonières* in the Parisian eighteenth century and nineteenth-century middle-class housewives.¹³

Scott does not limit herself to criticizing an essentialist notion of woman or calling for a historicization of feminine identity. She also formulates a *theory of identity formation*. Her theorization conflicts with the view that the formation of women as subjects results from a process of coming into consciousness on the basis of a common experience of reality and position in society. In fact, the essentialist notion of woman not only presupposes the existence of a fixed and atemporal feminine subject, but also naturalizes the differentiating categories at work in forming the subject. As Scott states, “by assuming that women have inherent characteristics and objective identities consistently and predictably different from men’s, and that these generate definably female needs and interests, historians imply that sexual difference is a natural rather than a social phenomenon. The search for an analysis of discrimination gets caught by a circular logic in which ‘experience’ explains gender difference and gender difference explains the asymmetries of male and female ‘experience.’” As a result, “typically the visions of what constitutes male and female experience appeal to or incorporate existing normative definitions”; therefore, “women’s history written from this position, and the politics that follow from it, end up endorsing the ideas of unalterable sexual difference that are used to justify discrimination.” To challenge this kind of history, Scott proposes another sort of historical practice which does not merely study “the things that have happened to women and men” and the ways “they have reacted to them.” Rather, this new kind of history focuses on how “the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed” (*GPH*, 4, 6).

The second theoretical premise of Scott’s concept of identity is that subjects do not preexist the categories that define their identities. These categories constitute people as historical subjects and actors, classifying them according to a particular conception of the world. Identities are not the sum total of the personal attributes that belong to subjects; rather, attributes are defining and constituting elements of the identities of those who are said to have or bear those attributes. As Scott affirms, identities “don’t pre-exist” their “political invocations” and “categories of identity we take for granted as rooted in our physical bodies (gender and race) or in our cultural (ethnic, religious) heritages are, in fact, retrospectively linked to those roots” (“FE,” 285). Therefore, it is not that sex, class, or race determines a person’s identity,

but that sex, class, or race have already been discursively established as criteria or recognizable markers of identity. Thus just as Scott affirms that there is no universal human nature that can be attributed to women in any and all historical times, she denies that women's identity is the expression of a preexisting female identity that can be invoked at any given historical moment. She believes that such a view can neither account for the changing character of women's identity, nor for the very fact that at some point "women" became a form of identity. It cannot account "either for the subjectively different perceptions women have of themselves as women or for the ways in which at certain moments 'women' become consolidated as an identity group." In this way Scott maintains that the community of women does not preexist its invocation, but is generated by signifying operations, including "fantasies," which posit women as transcending both history and difference. That is, such signifying operations wield the category of women in order to give coherence to confusion and reduce multiplicity to unity and, in so doing, to congeal the category as an identity ("FE," 288, 290).

Certainly, the process of the discursive constitution of any identity is masked when that identity appears as something natural and stable. But this appearance should not lead us to forget the operation of the process itself and the need for historians to proceed to its analysis, especially if we want to understand and explain the formation of the identity in question. As Scott indicates, the presumption of a categorical and universal subject (whether worker, peasant, woman, black) obscures the operations of difference that underlie and inform the organization of social life. Each one of these categories, once taken as something fixed, solidifies the subject's constituting process and makes the process less visible; in turn, this leads to naturalizing the effects of the process rather than analyzing its operation ("EE," 791–792). From this argument it follows that what changes through time is not simply the perception about a certain identity, but the identity itself. As Scott argues, "there's an illusory sameness established by referring to a category of person (women, workers, African Americans, homosexuals) as if it never changed, as if not the category, but only its historical circumstances varied over time." Thus, historians of women have wondered, for instance, in what way the changes in the legal, social, economic, and medical status of women affected their possibilities of liberation and equality. However, the question of how these changes altered the meaning of the term women itself has been asked less frequently, even though the category is uncritically presupposed in these sorts of analysis ("FE," 285).

For Scott, identity is not the mere expression of a set of physical or social attributes that serve as its referents. Identity emerges from the mediation of

classificatory and differentiated categories of identity at work in each particular case. This is what makes identities differential and relational entities. That is, identities are formed in contrast with other identities and by means of operations of differentiation and exclusion. As Scott puts it, the “relational nature of difference” implies that identities are not inherent in subjects, but rather produced “discursively by contrast with others.” A person is “something” not because she or he is that something intrinsically, but because she or he is not something else. So, for instance, “part of being white” meant “not being black”; Englishness was established in contrast to Indianness.¹⁴

The notion of language as a system of signification and the vision of identity as a historical entity that is differential and discursively constructed crystallize in Scott’s concept of “gender.” Scott begins with the distinction between sex and gender; she defines gender as “the social organization of sexual difference.” Gender, she writes, does not reflect “fixed and natural physical differences between women and men,” because the meanings of those differences “vary across cultures, social groups, and time,” since “nothing about the body, including women’s reproductive organs, determines univocally how social divisions will be shaped” (*GPH*, 2).¹⁵ However, Scott does not restrict her critique to distinguishing between sex and gender, between the physical fact and the social relations based on it. She goes one step further in her theorization. For her, the concept of gender does not designate merely men’s and women’s social roles, but refers to modes of knowledge—integrally related to linguistic patterns—that organize the perception of nature and its relation to those social roles. Gender is not just a social phenomenon that changes with time, but the effect of a discursive articulation of sex as well as of the relations between the sexes. As she puts it, “we cannot see sexual difference except as a function of our knowledge about the body and that knowledge is not ‘pure,’ cannot be isolated from its implication in a broad range of discursive contexts.” Consequently, sexual difference is not “the originary cause from which social organization ultimately can be derived. It is instead a variable social organization that itself must be explained” (*GPH*, 2).

From this point of view, the concept of gender leads us to investigate “the specific forms taken by the social organization of sexual difference,” although it would be wrong to presume these forms “as variations on an unchanging theme of patriarchal domination.” The concept of gender does not refer merely to the changing relations between men and women or between sexes, but rather to the way in which such relations have been conceived and categorized. This concept demands a careful analysis of the “concrete manifestations” and the “different meanings the same words might have.” Even as the term gender refers “to the ways in which relationships between men and

women were conceived,” neither the relationships nor the men and women are to be taken as the same in all cases. For that reason, it is not enough to apply the notion of gender to these relations; it is more fundamentally a question of interrogating and historicizing the terms with which these relations are conceptualized.¹⁶

It is precisely this definition of gender that leads Scott both to make a clear distinction between the history of women and the history of gender, and to affirm that a significant number of the works that are published in the area belong to the first category and not to the second. In her view, the object of historical study should not be simply to document the difference between men and women, but to inquire into the operation generating that difference as significant and meaningful; she describes this operation as having a discursive character. According to Scott, a considerable number of studies that purport to offer a “gender analysis” are often “quite predictable studies of women,” or studies of differences in the status, experience, and possibilities open to women and men. Those studies “rarely examine how the meanings of ‘women’ and ‘men’ are discursively established.” In fact, she concludes, many feminist scholars who use the term “gender” explicitly reject the premise that “men” and “women” are historically variable categories. As a result, the concept of “gender” has been losing its critical edge in recent scholarly and political discourse (*GPHR*, xii). In fact, according to Scott, it is ever more common to find gender equated with the enumeration or explication of the social roles that belong to the sexes. Since the nineties, the concept “seems to have lost its ability to startle and provoke us.” In the United States it has become a term of ordinary use that routinely appears offered as “a synonym for women, for the differences between the sexes, for sex.” At times, Scott adds, the term “denotes the social rules imposed on men and women,” but it rarely refers “to the knowledge that organizes our perceptions of ‘nature.’” As a result, the concept of gender is in the process of losing its groundbreaking character along with its analytic potential. Scott confesses that for this reason that she uses it less and less frequently in her work (*GPHR*, xii).

Despite these problems with “gender,” Scott’s historical work continues to demonstrate how such categories might be used to alter academic work and reveal the political stakes in such work. For instance, Scott makes use of the notion of women’s identity—understood as a historical and discursively constructed entity—as an analytical tool in her historical study of French feminism.¹⁷ The main thesis of her study is that the feminist identity characteristic of the modern age was an effect of the signifying articulation of women’s social situation by means of categories of a modern universalizing discourse of individual, equality, and human rights. In concrete terms, it was

the perception—through such discourses and their categories—of women’s subordination and of their exclusion from the public sphere that led women to start conceiving of themselves as subjects with rights. In so doing, they acquired their historical and political identity as women. Whether claiming their condition as equals—equality-based feminism—or the importance of their differences—difference feminism—feminists defined themselves using a normative pattern of identity, and employing the category of the abstract individual introduced by universalizing discourse.

But the universalizing discourse not only engendered a new women’s identity, allowing women to define themselves as subjects with rights, but also gave rise to feminism itself, for feminism emerged as a result of the contradiction between the declaration of equality of all human beings and the exclusion of a portion of them—women—from the public sphere and from political participation. Feminism and the conflicts it generated must be considered “as symptoms of contradictions in the political discourses that produced feminism” and that it appealed to and challenged at the same time. These were the discourses of individualism, individual rights, and social obligation, as used by republicans and socialists to organize the institutions of democratic citizenship (*OP*, 3).

Feminism and feminist practice are caught in a paradox, according to Scott, precisely because contemporary women’s identity originates through the mediation of a universalizing discourse. The paradox lies in that to fight difference and exclusion of women, women have to begin and support their claims on the same discursive categories—particularly that of the abstract individual—that have produced that difference and that exclusion. Women’s calls for equality are paradoxical because they are based on the same categories or principles that define them as unequal and that, consequently, expel them from the public sphere. Feminists, writes Scott, challenged “the practice of excluding women from citizenship.” In order to do so, they based their position on the argument that there was “neither a logical nor an empirical connection between the sex of one’s body and one’s ability to engage in politics, that sexual difference was not an indicator of social, intellectual, or political capacity.” However, Scott continues, even though those arguments are powerful and compelling, they were also paradoxical, because in order “to protest women’s exclusion,” feminists had to act “on behalf of women and so invoked the very difference they sought to deny” (*OP*, x). Similarly, when exclusion was legitimated “by reference to the different biologies of women and men,” sexual difference was established as a natural fact and an ontological basis for social and political differentiation. Thus, in the age of democratic revolutions, “women” came into being as political outsiders through the

discourse of sexual difference. Feminism was a protest against the political exclusion of women. Its objective was to eliminate sexual difference from politics. However, feminism had to make its claims on behalf of “women,” who were discursively produced, precisely, through sexual difference. As a result, as much as 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” (*OP*, 3–4).

Nevertheless, when women took up their classification as a separate group, a classification made possible within modern discourse itself, it was that discourse that granted authority and effectiveness to their demands. Only then did they articulate their political claims in a discourse shared by their opponents (*OP*, x). This implies that the universalizing discourse not only generated feminism, but also established the conditions for the possibility of its practice, its struggle, and its demands.

In this regard we can also say that the practice is also a “discursive effect.”¹⁸ As such, it bears on Scott’s theory of human action. In response to individualist and rationalist arguments for human behavior, she argues that, for feminists, action cannot be explained in terms of individual characteristics or will, since subjects are not autonomous entities; rather, action must be explained in terms of the effect of the discursive conditions and contexts which themselves form the conditions of possibility for action. Thus, she states, “instead of assuming that agency follows from an innate human will, I want to understand feminism in terms of the discursive processes . . . that produce political subjects, that make agency . . . possible even when it is forbidden or denied” (*OP*, 16).

This implies, in turn, that discursive contexts establish the rules of domination as well as the terms and possibility for resistance, granting as well its meaning and effectiveness. The universalizing definition of human nature and of equality generates women’s identity and establishes a horizon of political expectations for women: achieving equality. Moreover, this discourse makes feminist struggles effective, for they are based on principles, categories, and arguments, especially universality, largely shared with their opponents, who cannot, then, fail to consider them without abrogating their own principles. The claim to rights appeals both to difference and to equality, invoking universalization, but asking also what it means in light of sexual difference. Therefore, argues Scott, the task is not just to focus on the opposition between domination and resistance, or between control and action, but to discern those complex processes that enable and set limits to the possibilities of action by people or groups.¹⁹ From this point of view,

feminism's use of universalizing principles, categories, and arguments is not simply a rhetorical appeal, a merely instrumental use of the available language and cultural values; rather, it is a consequence of the fact that feminism itself is constituted by these same principles and categories and seeks to make its intervention there. We might say that feminism was not only born within such language but also depends on that language for its continuing operation. As Scott writes, "[T]he history of feminism is not simply a history of contrary women uttering dissenting opinions. Nor can it be captured by the oxymoronic description of 'women claiming the rights of Man.' *The paradoxes I refer to are not strategies of opposition, but the constitutive elements of feminism itself*" (OP, 5, emphasis added). Feminism has offered so many paradoxes because it was articulated on a discourse that equated individuality with masculinity.

Changes in the discursive context affected the shape of feminist identity and practice. This is because modern feminist identity, feminism, and its practice arose from the historical deployment of established political discourses. According to Scott, we should acknowledge that feminists have formulated their claims for rights "in terms of very different epistemologies" and that their arguments "must be read that way," and not as evidence of "a transcendent or continuous woman's consciousness or women's experience." That is, even though the repeated pattern of the paradox grants the claims an "aura of timelessness," the feminist concepts used "were rooted in their times and can finally be understood only in their specificity." History accounts not only for the feminists' "variety of positions," but also for the different ways in which the identity of "woman" was conceived (OP, 13).²⁰

The theoretical challenge that Scott has posed to historians does not entail, as Scott has carefully noted, a mere idealist *inversion* of the materialist or objectivist model of explanation. On the contrary, it affirms the premise that language, inasmuch as it is discourse, is an active element in the formation of subjects as well as their practices. As a result, the discursive categories underlying these subjects and their practices, and whose mediating effect has made them possible, should not only serve as a point of departure for every historical study, but also be taken as a basic explanatory variable. If this challenge is accepted, Scott argues, we will pay attention to language and to the processes through which categories and meanings have been articulated; otherwise, we will continue to impose models on the world that perpetuate conventional understandings rather than open up new interpretive possibilities.²¹ In sum, historians should respond to questions such as: "How have categories of representation and analysis—such as class, race, gender, relations of production, biology, identity, subjectivity, agency, experience, even culture—achieved

their foundational status? What have been the effects of their articulations? What does it mean for historians to study the past in terms of these categories and for individuals to think of themselves in these terms?" ("EE," 796). On the basis of this theoretical challenge that Scott has posed, a new practice of history has taken form.

NOTES

1. I have discussed this new historiographic model in greater detail in Miguel A. Cabrera, *Postsocial History: An Introduction* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004).

2. Joan W. Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (1987): 3. Hereafter cited as "OL" in parenthetical references.

3. Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality vs. Difference: or, the Uses of Post-Structuralist Theory for Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 14 (Spring 1988): 34.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 35.

6. Joan W. Scott, "A Reply to Criticism," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 32 (1987): 40. Hereafter cited as "RC" in parenthetical references.

7. Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 3–4. Hereafter cited as *GPH* in parenthetical references.

8. Joan W. Scott, "A Statistical Representation of Work: *La Statistique de l'industrie à Paris, 1847–1848*," in *Gender and the Politics of History*, 113–138.

9. Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 776. Hereafter cited as "EE" in parenthetical references.

10. Joan W. Scott, "'The Tip of the Volcano,'" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 3 (1993): 439 and 442.

11. Joan W. Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001): 286. Hereafter cited as "FE" in parenthetical references.

12. Joan W. Scott, "Introduction," in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan W. Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2–4.

13. Ibid., 4–5.

14. Ibid., 8.

15. This notion of gender as a historical phenomenon is presented in her famous article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–1075.

16. Joan W. Scott, "Preface to the Revised Edition," in *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), xii. Hereafter cited as *GPHR* in parenthetical references.

17. Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996). Hereafter cited as *OP* in parenthetical references.

18. Joan W. Scott, review of *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, by Linda Gordon, *Signs* 16 (1990): 851.

19. *Ibid.*, 852.

20. As Scott commented about this work, "Feminist identity was an effect of a rhetorical political strategy invoked differently by different feminists at different times" ("Fantasy Echo," 286).

21. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality," 35.

Out of Their Orbit

Celebrities and Eccentrics in Nineteenth-Century France

MARY LOUISE ROBERTS

What do you call a woman who sleeps in a coffin and keeps a pet alligator? Or a woman who harbors two lions in her backyard? In the nineteenth century, such a woman was called an “eccentric.” Two such French eccentrics were Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899) (fig. 3.1) and Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) (fig. 3.2). Rosa Bonheur enjoyed international renown as a painter of animals, most famously *The Horse Fair* in 1853. She was the most recognized woman painter of her day, and the first French woman to receive the *Légion d’honneur*.¹ Like Bonheur, Sarah Bernhardt was an international celebrity. Besides bringing Paris to its feet in such plays as *Cleopatra* and *Hamlet*, the actress opened her own Parisian theater, where she acted and produced when she was not touring. By the 1890s, Bernhardt had become far more than an actress: she was also “the Bernhardt,” *la Divine*, arguably the most famous woman in the world.

These two women distinguished themselves by establishing reputations as eccentrics as well as celebrities. Bonheur attracted attention as an *excentrique* in the 1850s by jaunting about Paris astride a horse in trousers and a jacket. Men of position scheduled to rendezvous with her in the Bois de Boulogne took one look and galloped off in the opposite direction.² Bonheur also attracted gossip by keeping an entire menagerie of animals in her back yard, including lions, almost forty sheep, goats, horses, oxen, mules, and a wild boar. Similarly, a wide range of contemporaries saw Bernhardt “as always in love with eccentricity.”³ “Scour the annals of the theatrical arts,” dared the drama critic Francisque Sarcey, “you will never again see as strange a spectacle as this turbulent, treacherous life.”⁴ Like Bonheur, Bernhardt was fond of large beasts such as pumas and alligators, and gave them the free run of her