Changing Societies & Personalities, 2019
Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 273–275
http://dx.doi.org/10.15826/csp.2019.3.3.076

BOOK REVIEW

Joan Wallach Scott (2018). Sex and Secularism. Princeton University Press

Andrey S. Menshikov
Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The work on the text was supported by the grant of the Russian Science Foundation (No. 17-18-01194)

This book, written by a notable specialist in "gender and women's history in France" (p. 15), makes its intent clear from the start. It is a polemical contribution to the ongoing debate on the "clash of civilizations", and the role of Islam in the modern societies. Islam, however, is not at the focus of the analysis. The author consistently deconstructs a rhetorical equation between secularism and modern values such as freedom and equality by reconstructing the ways the discourse of secularism functioned at different historical stages. Today, the identification of secularism with the Enlightenment, with the triumph of reason over religion, with emancipation and gender equality produces discursively its own counterpart, which is oppressive, violent, and irrational Islam: "By definition, secularism is associated with reason, freedom, and women's rights, Islam with a culture of oppression and terror" (p. 3). However, the historical genealogy of secularism traced by Joan Wallach Scott reveals that "*gender inequality was fundamental to the articulation of the separation of church and state that inaugurated Western modernity* […] Euro-Atlantic modernity entailed a new order of *women's subordination*, assigning them to a feminized familial sphere meant to complement the rational masculine realms of politics and economics" (p. 3, italics in the original).

By disentangling the meanings of the secular, which refers to "things nonreligious"; secularization, which designates the process of replacing religious authority with rationality; and secularity, which captures the modern situation of nonreligious way of life, J. W. Scott makes clear that the discourse of secularism was hierarchical from the start, and was designed to order the relation between the European and its cultural others, the past and the future, masculine and

Received 15 September 2019
Published online 5 October 2019

asmenshikov@urfu.ru

feminine. This hierarchical ordering eventually necessitated the emergence of religion as a singular phenomenon (lumping together everything non-secular) and the invention of "world religions". In the late nineteenth century during the anticlerical campaigns for the separation of organized religion from the state and for the moral autonomy of the individuals against cultural hegemony of Christianity, the term secularism was coined in England by George Holyoake, a founder of the British Central Secular Society, in 1851, while in France the word *laïcité* was first used in 1871. Thus, a set of following oppositions emerged:

> "Political" and "religious" in the nineteenth century meant the nation versus institutionalized religion (state versus church), but also the Christian nation versus the "uncivilized" and "primitive" tribes in Africa and the Ottoman lands. "Public" and "private" separated the market and politics, instrumental rationality and bureaucratic organization from home and family, spirituality, affective relationality, and sexual intimacy (p. 13).

The separation of the public with its rationality and the market with its competition, on the one hand, from the private with its personal spirituality and the family with its emotional sustenance, on the other, was reflected in the gender division between male and female domains of society: "Gender difference was inscribed in a schematic description of the world as divided into separate spheres, public and private, male and female" (p. 31). It is necessary to highlight in this context that gender relations were not subordinate to politics. On the contrary, J. W. Scott emphasizes the "mutually constitutive nature of gender and politics" (p. 25). Indeterminacy of the denaturalized and secularized politics needed certainty that would be rooted in "immutability of gender" and "in human nature and biology rather than divine law" (p. 31), whereas gender inequality was interpreted through the optics of political interests (demographic reproduction and family morality), and social laws (complementarity of genders in the division of labor). Thus, gender inequality is inseparable from the development of nation-state and capitalism.

The last chapter of the book focuses on the implications of secularism in modern society. In particular, how the criticism of Islam from the perspective of secularism reveals the underpinning asymmetries in Western societies. Subordination of women in Islam is presented primarily through the practices of veiling, and consequently, the liberation is understood as "unveiling". Human agency of Muslim women is limited in this discourse to sexual liberation, to the right to uncover their bodies, and thereby to "advertising their sexual availability, and so appealing to longstanding gender asymmetries" (p. 158). As J. W. Scott points out, "the focus on liberated sexuality (whether hetero- or homosexual) echoes with the notion of consumer desire as the motor of the market and serves to draw attention away from the economic and social disadvantages that result from discrimination and structured forms of inequality" (p. 159). The equation of freedom with ability to pursue sexual desire occludes the persistent inequalities (wage disparity, glass ceiling, domestic violence, etc.):

> Humans are the subjects and objects of desire, at once consumers and commodities, naturalized as such. The collapse of the distinction between public and private, the entry into the public arena of the formerly private feelings and practices of sex does not necessarily politicize sex […] the idea that sex itself is natural (and so presocial) is depoliticizing (p. 177).

So, in their struggle against gender oppressive Islam the Western societies demonstrate that today we too often limit the individual freedom to consumer freedom, and the liberation to sexual liberation. Thus, echoing Foucault, J. W. Scott reminds us that in our historical deconstruction of emancipation it is not only the positive ideal that mattered but also "the point was a negative one: to be emancipated from sex, not to be defined by it" (p. 162).

Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that secular self is in no way more "natural" than any other, and it equally

> means a set of bodily practices to be learned, rehearsed and performed, ranging from ways of dressing (and undressing), talking and socializing with men to enacting in public. The habitations of the secular are not transmitted "naturally" and implicitly, but on the contrary become part of a project of modernity and politics of self that require [for those coming from outside] assimilation and "acculturation" to Western culture (p. 164).

Although the author planned to "revisit a large body of literature written by second wave feminists, as well as by historians of religion, race, and colonialism" and to "synthesize this work and offer new interpretations based upon it" (p. 3) rather than offer an analysis of new empirical material, the book will be useful to historians, as well as to political philosophers, and specialists in Religious Studies.