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# The Politics Of The Veil (The Public Square)



## Synopsis

In 2004, the French government instituted a ban on the wearing of "conspicuous signs" of religious affiliation in public schools. Though the ban applies to everyone, it is aimed at Muslim girls wearing headscarves. Proponents of the law insist it upholds France's values of secular liberalism and regard the headscarf as symbolic of Islam's resistance to modernity. *The Politics of the Veil* is an explosive refutation of this view, one that bears important implications for us all. Joan Wallach Scott, the renowned pioneer of gender studies, argues that the law is symptomatic of France's failure to integrate its former colonial subjects as full citizens. She examines the long history of racism behind the law as well as the ideological barriers thrown up against Muslim assimilation. She emphasizes the conflicting approaches to sexuality that lie at the heart of the debate--how French supporters of the ban view sexual openness as the standard for normalcy, emancipation, and individuality, and the sexual modesty implicit in the headscarf as proof that Muslims can never become fully French. Scott maintains that the law, far from reconciling religious and ethnic differences, only exacerbates them. She shows how the insistence on homogeneity is no longer feasible for France--or the West in general--and how it creates the very "clash of civilizations" said to be at the root of these tensions. *The Politics of the Veil* calls for a new vision of community where common ground is found amid our differences, and where the embracing of diversity--not its suppression--is recognized as the best path to social harmony.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Scott does a good job of conveying the hysteria that surrounded the foulard debate in France...Scott's broad and exhaustive research makes for a bracing account of the debate."--Laila Lalami, *The Nation*"Veil-bashing is suddenly socially acceptable among not merely tabloid-reading Little Englanders, but also metropolitan sophisticates...Why should a bit of cloth so threaten the French republic? That is the central question posed by [this] subtle new study...Many French commentators cast the debate about the veil as an issue about Muslims, Islam and integration. Scott, a distinguished historian at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, shows that it revealed rather more about the French themselves."--Carla Power, *New Statesman*"This book is a powerful denunciation of the French government and people whom Scott labels as racist, discriminatory, and intolerant of Muslim immigrants primarily from North Africa. In instituting a ban on the wearing of Muslim headscarves in public schools, the author claims that France has gone too far in its policies of strict secularism and adherence to the values of republicanism in which citizenship is conceived of as an individual matter devoid of ethnic and religious content. . . . [A] fascinating piece of scholarship."--S. Majstorovic, *Choice*"It is difficult to do justice to the rigour and subtlety of this important book, written by a distinguished historian with previous works on gender and democratic politics. It should be read not only by those interested in the French situation but also by anyone who is concerned by the hysteria surrounding Muslims in Europe. It clarifies the ideas behind current debates on multiculturalism, assimilation and integration, and points the way towards a solution."--Mary Hossain, *Journal of Islamic Studies*"The Politics of the Veil is a propitious contribution to the exploration and analysis of the complex meanings and purported meanings of these phenomena that have come to symbolise for Turkey and France the struggle to defend the foundations of their Republic against forces that allegedly undermine all that is glorious and good about these 'singular' or 'exceptional' states."-- Elif Aydaşın, *The Muslim News*"[I]t is important to remember the lessons of the headscarf ban, to understand the politics that lay behind it and its racist implications. This book is a useful reminder of both."--Sadie Robinson, *International Socialism*"Scott's book is a wonderful discussion about how well and how badly societies respond to religious challenges. I strongly recommend it."--Iva Ellen Deutchman, *Politics and Religion*"This book will undoubtedly rank as one of the best Anglo-American critical commentaries on the affaire du foulard and the 2004 law banning religious signs in schools...[Scott] succeeds in providing a magisterial demonstration of the power of discourse--of the ways in which abstract ideas, when mediated through a vibrant political culture, can influence collective thinking and practice."--Cécile Laborde, *La Vie Des Idées*"Joan Scott authoritatively rejects many of the arguments that are often used in favor of totally excluding Islam from the public sphere. In doing so

she has provided much food for thought and has written a book that is equally valuable to scholars and to students in a graduate or upper level undergraduate course."--Hootan Shambayati, Law and Politics Book Review

"The Politics of the Veil is written in clear and accessible prose, and its provocative yet succinct chapters are thought provoking and user friendly at the same time. . . . [T]he book can be easily divided up and read over two or three class periods or it can be comfortably assigned as a whole. Because its subject matter is so pertinent to so many disciplines, the book can be used in history, sociology, anthropology, political science, gender studies, European Studies, religion, or any courses in the humanities or social sciences examining contemporary French politics and society."--Kristen Ghodsee, Women's Studies International Forum

"The Politics of the Veil . . . challenges the traditions of detached scholarship, yet Scott's careful use of specific evidence adheres to scholarly methods and demonstrates how historians can contribute critical insights to the public debates of our own time."--Lloyd Kramer, Journal of Modern History

"This is a very important and . . . welcome book. . . . [T]his sharp and insightful study is undoubtedly a must for any student on not only French society, but of questions regarding secular ideology, gender, and 'deterritorialized' Islam in general."--Per-Erik Nilsson, Environment and Planning

"Scott succeeds in revealing how the inability of French government's failure to address the issue of the veil meaningfully underlines its current inability to create a country where the co-existence of differences, rather than celebration of what is common or the same, is the basis of community."--Irmak Ertuna, Darkmatter

"Scott unfolds excellent and detailed analyses of the construction of the citizen in the French nation state, of French racism and Algeria, and of the prominent news events in the French veiling controversy."--Virginia Corvid, Feminist Collections

"Brilliant, crisp, and cogently argued. Joan W. Scott's novel and trenchant discursive analysis exposes the prejudices of the reductionist French versions of secularism and feminism regarding Islam and French Muslims from North African and Arab origins. The study is illuminating far beyond the French case, as former colonial and/or working subjects struggle for integration and recognition of their difference."--Abdellah Hammoudi, Princeton University

"Carefully argued, insightful and humane, Joan Scott's *The Politics of the Veil* is far and away the best account of France's identity crisis that was signaled by the famous headscarf affair. The final chapter, on the symbolic meanings of the headscarf/veil, is the most original and brilliant piece of writing that I have read on this topic. This is an indispensable book, transcending the particularity of French obsessions and forcing the reader to think about wider political problems that concern us all."--Talal Asad, author of *On Suicide Bombing*

"Scott traces the history and politics of veil controversies in France and draws apart

intertwined strands, starting with the legacy of racism from the colonial past. She persuasively argues for the negotiation of cultural and religious differences rather than their negation. This book will be required reading for all those concerned with the integration of Muslims into Western Christian societies."--Beth Baron, author of *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*"This is an important and timely book that will challenge the dominant terms used to debate the French government's ban on the veil in public schools. Through a careful analysis of historical and contemporary French discourse on Muslims and Arabs, Scott helps us see how the controversy over the veil is indexical of a deep paradox that haunts the ideology of French Republicanism of which the principle of *laïcité* is a crucial part."--Saba Mahmood, author of *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I sold this book back to the campus book store at the end of the semester and I'm kicking myself for it. I really enjoyed this book and it gave me a fresh understanding to the conflicts around the veil (and its various names and forms). I walked away with an informed stance on this political issue. Yes, this book leans more on the side of "Let them wear it if they want" but it is not overly unbalanced. I would recommend this book to anyone who has an active mind in modern politics.

Scott could have gone deeper in many areas or added an appendix if she felt that would take her off topic. good entry level book and for non academics.

Better than I think

Found this so engaging and interesting. It definitely sheds light and gives an insight to socio-political situation in France.

Scott's book looks at the politics of the veil in France. The analysis is a bit simplistic. It is written for an American audience. It is a nice read if you are interested in comparing the American context, but not my recommendation if you want to learn more about the French context on its own.

Read this book for a class recently (Politics of Immigration) and it really detailed historically, France's position on immigration and assimilation. Excellent read!

The book offers interesting facts...but is a little bit light in my opinion. It lacks depth. The seller was

great though! Great quality book, received in days...

Joan Wallach Scott's thesis is that banning the veil in French schools has only exacerbated the differences and tensions between the French Muslim and French non-Muslim populations. I think she makes a legitimate argument for this contention. However in the process of making her case, she manages to systematically bash the French in general for being racist, sexist, colonialist, elitist and probably some other "-ists" I can't remember. No one is spared, neither government officials, nor teachers, nor politicians, nor intellectuals, nor feminists, nor the guys she overheard in the post office. Having lived in an Islamist state doesn't impress her either. Check out this passage from page 163: "Chahdortt Djavann, whose claim to expertise was her own experience in Iran, offered sensationist tales of women's lack of freedom in Muslim countries (maybe because they are true?)... Djavann stated not only that women were oppressed in "Islamic societies" (her quotes), but also (in terms of colonial attitudes I described in chapter 2) that the separation of the sexes necessarily gave rise to rape and prostitution." Okay not only does she dismiss a woman with real experience living in a theocracy, but also accuses an Iranian woman of having colonial attitudes. Maybe if this woman had read about living in Iran in a journal instead of actually having lived there she would have gotten more respect, but oh wait, what am I saying, she blows off all the French intellectuals too. Scott never even directly acknowledges (that I could tell) that assimilation is a problem or even desirable. She ends up the book by saying something to the effect that the French need to find a better way to negotiate "being-in-common", whatever that means. I would ask her, specifically what she would have the French do?

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