Joan Scott's "Gender" Twenty Years Later: Evaluating an Intervention

When Joan Scott delivered what would later become her influential essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 1985, it was a call to arms as well as a necessary intervention in how historians engaged with gender. Among her more provocative statements was her observation that the notion of "separate spheres" was not simply a historical metaphor for social organization in the nineteenth century, but was alive and well within contemporary historiography. Gender was seen as being relevant for those social historians whose interests involved "women, children, families" but for historians of war, diplomacy, and high politics, Scott noticed "gender seems not to apply." For Scott in 1985, the state of the field remained constricted by the notion that "gender is a concept associated with the study of things related to women."[1]

This line of thought lead to Scott's second major observation, that "gender history" had become merely a euphemism for "women's history." Specifically, it was a certain kind of women's history that sought to elide the feminist connotations inherent in calling itself "women's history." Joan Scott pushed historians and feminist scholars alike to abandon this euphemistic, lopsided usage and move toward an analytic framework where gender is "used to suggest that information about women is necessarily information about men."[2] In such a usage, gender is a tandem relationship that studies

[1] Joan Scott. "Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 32-33.
[2] Ibid, 31-32.

women and men and constructions of femininity and masculinity as part of, not separate from, each other.

Scott's most salient point about gender was her proposition that "gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power."[3] Gender, like race and class, "is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated." As political history is the history of power, this statement remains Scott's strongest selling point for why political historians should and can find gender useful in their work. In her conclusion, Scott promised historians that investigations of gender in all realms of historical study would yield "new perspectives on old questions...redefine old questions in new terms…(and) make women visible as active participants."[4]

Less Joan Scott be taken for a kind of gold standard when it comes to the writing of gender and history, one may wonder how realistic is it for political historians to incorporate gender into their work and what a gendered political history looks like. Over twenty years later, it is productive to revisit Scott's ideas and observe how her claims about the "usefulness" of gender have been taken up by political historians. *Defining the Victorian Nation*, a history of class, race, and gender in the 1867 British Reform Act and *Veiled Empire*, Douglas Northup's narrative of gender and imperialism in Soviet Uzbekistan, are two recent works that successfully grapple with gender as a category of analysis in a way that validates Scott's intervention. Two books by no means constitute an exhaustive study, but the fact that these histories do fulfill certain aspects of Scott's criteria proves that the integration of gender into histories of politics is not an impossible thing. Though the degree to which Scott's ideas about gender are being enacted in these

[3] Ibid, 44.
[4] Ibid, 50.

two histories varies, undoubtedly *Veiled Empire and Defining the Victorian Nation* represent political histories which gender is not in a "separate sphere," but instead occupies the center.

Gender and Intersectionality in *Defining the Victorian Nation*

Gender, along with race and class, was a primary analytical category for historians Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall in their joint effort of writing a history of the British Reform Act in *Defining the Victorian Nation*. All three shared the conception that the passage of the Reform Act, the bill which gave suffrage to working class men in Britain, was an important historical moment when the boundaries around citizenship were being contested. As political historians, Hall, McClelland, and Rendall conceptualized Britain in 1867 as a nation defined as much by those who were outside the boundaries of enfranchisement as by those who were gathered within it.

Defining the Victorian Nation has a unique structure, with a shared introduction from all three authors, followed by three successive chapters written by individual authors focused on a single theme: Keith McClelland on class, Jane Rendall on gender, and Catherine Hall on race. No mere allusion, gender and Scott's article specifically, were highlighted in the introduction as one of the primary inspirations for the shape this particular political history took. The authors credited Scott with the disruption of "separate spheres" within the discipline and stated that one of the chief objectives of their book was "the recovery of a political history – however different – for women, and…the essentially gendered nature of politics in nineteenth-century Britain.[5] The authors also

[5] Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 33-34.

promised to "avoid oversimplified dichotomies" of men and women by paying attention to the intersectionality of gender and class- to see working class men as men and bourgeois suffragettes as bourgeois. Finally, in a nod toward Scott's promise of gender allowing historians to ask new questions, they acknowledged that the definition of political activity itself may indeed need broadening "to enable a more effectively gendered understanding" of women's involvements in Victorian politics.[6]

Jane Rendall's "The Citizenship of Women and the Reform Act of 1867," as the most explicitly gender-orientated chapter in the book, focused on the creation of a women's suffrage movement in Britain and female suffragists' campaigns to amend the language of the Reform Bill to include women. Rendall envisioned her narrative of the early victories of women's suffrage as an intervention against linear histories of women's long battle for the vote as "something that assumes a movement progressing from small beginnings to final success."[7] In Rendall's opinion, such teleological and triumphalist narratives have obscured a much more complex history of women's suffrage and one in which women had more political agency in the 1860's. She also argued that in 1865, "gender was one of the most significant determinants of the boundaries of that political nation," and that proponents of female suffrage were dependent on demands for political inclusion for some women that were predicated on the exclusion of others.[8]

Perhaps the most obvious connection between Joan Scott's ideas and *Defining the Victorian Nation* was Rendall's decision to make women the protagonists of her chapter. Though women in 1867 were sixty years shy of possessing the franchise, Rendall nevertheless constructed them as political actors in her narrative. She did so by focusing

[6] Ibid, 36.
[7] Ibid, 119-20.
[8] Ibid, 120-21.

on the political activities of women who sought political power through their support of male politicians, specifically John Stuart Mill, the MP who introduced the idea in Parliament that the language of the Reform Bill should be changed from "man" to "person."[9] Though Mill's amendment failed, Rendall described how suffragettes themselves did not throw in the towel, and formed suffrage societies throughout Britain. Though these women did not have direct access to political power in the form of voting, Rendall cited the eventual passage of the Municipal Franchise Bill in 1869 (which allowed women to vote in municipal elections and hold municipal offices) as evidence for women's political influence in the Victorian era.[10]

Scott's notion of gender signifying power is also present in Rendall's chapter. Rendall noted how women manipulated language of sexual difference and discourses of exclusion in order to justify their access to the franchise. She wrote that suffragists "drew upon the familiarity of middle-class women with a rhetoric of 'women's mission'' and went so far as to say that granting the vote to middle-class women would also liberate their working class sisters from lack of education and abusive marriages.[11] Rendall also included the fact that the suffragist movement was forced to contend with gendered conceptions of "independence" as a necessary requirement for full voting rights. This association of independence with the male breadwinner and head of household made the case for the enfranchisement of married women very difficult. Such divisions split the suffrage movement for the rest of the nineteenth-century between those who sought to

[9] Ibid, 136.
[10] Ibid, 139, 152.
[11] Ibid, 163, 166.

win the perceived "easier" battle of votes for "independent" unmarried women, and those who had as their goal the enfranchisement of all women.[12]

The relationship between gender and power is actually stronger in Keith McClelland's class-focused chapter, "England's Greatness, the Working Man." McClelland established how central associations of manliness with independence were to working class men gaining the franchise as men. Working class men were successful in their quest for suffrage because they could play into Victorian ideals of "the respectable working man." As builders of the railways, ships, and furnaces of empire, working class men tied themselves to British concepts of "national greatness."[13] McClelland also stated that working class men were able to construct themselves as independent due to their status as fathers, husbands, and therefore heads of households. The shadow of this was an implied dependence on the part of the working man's children and wife. McClelland further tied gender to power in his statement that "the supposed equality of men was structured on an ability to control and dominate household dependents, and in, particular, women."[14]

The end result of *Defining the Victorian Nation* is a picture of mid-Victorian Britain in which "women made political choices." In terms of how Rendall engaged with Joan Scott's vision of a gendered political history, that Rendall made women protagonists in high politics is absolutely clear. Also fairly clear is the relationship between gender and power- that to vote one must be independent, and there was a gendered assumption in who could be independent enough to vote. What remains somewhat murky is whether or not Rendall has created a "new history" or was able, as Scott wrote, to ask new questions

[12] Ibid, 162-63.
[13] Ibid, 74, 95.
[14] Ibid, 98-100.

through her use of gender in her chapter. With its focus mainly on the backroom politics of the coterie surrounding John Stuart Mill and a handful of middle-class female suffragists, it is not altogether different from a great deal of other histories of party politics. The only difference being in that Rendall's story, some of the political actors were female. However, McClelland's use of gender as a defining characteristic of working class men's claims to citizenship in 1867 truly adds a new perspective to what is otherwise a narrative of popular politics. In some ways, McClelland's chapter is more of a true gender history because it uncovers the power inherent in definitions of masculinity and femininity in way Rendall does not engage with by focusing on women only.

***Veiled Empire:* Integrating Gender Into a Political History of Uzbekistan**

Imperialism and empire-building were the very realms of high politics Scott singled out in her address as being devoid of any understanding of gender. Nevertheless, Douglas Northrup has made gender integral to a history of imperialism and empire-building in his book *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* . Rather than being confined mostly to a single chapter, as in *Defining the Victorian Nation*, by focusing on the Soviet women's liberation campaign in Uzbekistan, Northrup placed gender at the heart of his narrative in such a way that it is present on almost every page.

Northrup may not have cited Joan Scott as a direct inspiration, but as his subtitle suggests, he conceived of Soviet Uzbekistan as a place where gender was often a site where relationships of power were contested. Though he could have focused on Soviet campaigns for water or land reform, Northrup argued that in this history gender is *the* organizing concept by which to understand how the Soviets attempted to create a

"modern" Uzbek state. Citing Lata Mani's influential essay "Contentious Traditions," Northrup established that like British India, this was another historical moment where women's (veiled) bodies "served as emblems of their society."[15]

Moreover, Northrup rooted Soviets' concern with the liberation of women in how Marxist rhetoric taught them to view women as a "surrogate proletariat." Presumably, once Central Asian women threw off their veils and became modern, they would embrace the Soviets as their liberators and pledge allegiance to the new Communist state.[16] Unveiling, in turn, would "modernize" and Europeanize the Uzbeks, transforming them "into Soviet citizens rather than simply imperial subjects."[17] Northrup constructed veiling as something that was anxiety provoking to the Soviets not just because it was foreign, but because it was gendered *and* foreign. Attempts to reform Uzbek masculinity were subordinated to the *hujum* or anti-veiling campaign, and it was not seen as contradictory for a male party member to dress traditionally, or even to keep his wife veiled.[18]

Veiled Empire can also very definitively been seen as an example of a political history where the use of gender has, in Scott's words, "made women visible as active participants." There is no doubt that women, veiled and unveiled, Uzbek and Soviet, are present and visible in Northrup's history. By choosing to focus on the *hujum* and the way women embodied the Uzbek nation to Soviet reformers, it would have been difficult for Northrup to avoid engaging with women as historical subjects.

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[15] Douglas Northrup, *Veiled Empire*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 37.
[16] Ibid, 12.
[17] Ibid, 23.
[18] Ibid, 99.

Though veiled women and the controversy surrounding them make women ever-present in *Veiled Empire*, that does not mean that the voices of women, received equal representation in Northrup's sources. Veiled women may be the subject of conversation, but their voices remained elusive in the accounts Northrup included in his book, which are mostly either from men (Soviet or indigenous) or women's department Zhenotdel reformers. Even his chapter entitled "Subaltern Voices" featured few accounts from Uzbek women on their decisions to veil or unveil. The accounts that are featured, such as the unveiled schoolteachers who "endured the outrages of our husbands" only to "appear as prostitutes in the imagination of women who still wear the paranji," are powerful and evocative. Unfortunately, such rich sources do not constitute the bulk of the chapter.[19]

Northrup, however, was not unaware of the difficulty of making these veiled women able to speak for themselves. The problem, Northrup acknowledged, was that the veiled women's voices contained in the archive remained problematic because "both sides - shared the same tendency to privilege only certain women's voices as legitimate."[20] One can assume then that he did not include many quotes from ordinary Uzbek women because they were perhaps coerced, either by Soviet activists or Muslim men. It was Northrup's challenge as a historian to read between the lines of the records left and to interrogate and problematize women who were speaking for or against veiling depending on their political location. In engaging with his sources in a cautious way, Northrup still managed to construct Uzbek women as having agency, "deciding from day to day how to live their lives." Pointing to the inconsistency in Soviet reports on the number of veiled women in Central Asia at any given time, Northrup hazarded to guess

[19] Ibid, 195.
[20] Ibid, 191.

that most likely women veiled or unveiled to suit their own purposes. He proposed that a woman might have unveiled at a demonstration and then reveiled at home, or unveiled in the city where there was more acceptance of unveiled women, but reveiled in her own neighborhood.[21]

The extreme care with which Northrup read his sources as well as his inclusion of the words and writings of many Zhenotdel women activists do somehow compensate for the women's voices that are absent. As Northrup himself pointed out and many historians know all too well, illiterate people, like the veiled women of Stalinist Uzbekistan, do not leave behind a great deal of written records. And though there may have been the possibility of Northrup conducting oral histories with women who were alive during the anti-veiling campaign, it seems extremely unlikely that these women would have been willing to speak with a white, male, Western outsider about something so politically charged as veiling. If subaltern voices cannot be heard in *Veiled Empire*, it is due to the limits of the archive rather than the limits of the historian.

Northrup's attention to gender and power and his careful reading of sources has indeed allowed him to write a new narrative not only of Uzbekistan, but of veiled women. The uniqueness of Northrup's approach can be seen in his successful avoidance of both Soviet and Uzbek modernizing discourses and Western feminist discourses that cast women's unveiling in a wholly positive, progressive light. By remaining neutral himself on the subject of veiling, Northrup was able to step aside and let the women and men who participated in this debate take their place as historical agents.

[21] Ibid 192.

Conclusion

The today question is no longer whether gender is a useful category of analysis but whether Joan Scott's "Gender" is still as useful to historians as it was twenty years ago. Gendered political histories like *Defining the Victorian Nation* and *Veiled Empire* are indicative that Scott's ideas about gender have not gone stale in the past two decades. However, both books show that "Gender As a Useful Category of Historican Analysis" is not exactly a roadmap for the writing of gender and history. Jane Rendall's chapter in *Defining the Victorian Nation* is an example that the integration of gender into political history does not always lead to new questions or new narratives. Moreover, Douglas Northrup's *Veiled Empire* especially showcases that the expectations of how much women can be made visible in political history may need to be revised, due to constraints about what can be found within historical archives. Scott may not have been completely clairvoyant about what gender would and would not do for historians of politics, but her ideas are still reflected in works being written today. Perhaps more importantly, her words in 1988 have themselves become a historical document, and serve now as a reminder and a warning of a time when gender and politics could comfortably exist in separate intellectual spheres.

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