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Gender Power Inequalities and the Annexation of Hawaii

Joan Scott claims, in her work “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” that gender is a system of perceived differences and is the primary way to recognize power discrepancies (42). She argues that gender inequalities exist globally and can be used to develop and reinforce other power relationships, especially in Western civilization (45). This claim leads to her second argument that since gender inequalities represent the negotiation and renegotiation power differences, they are found not only in modern societies but also throughout history. They must be used when looking at “how we think change occurs” (42). Therefore, she insists that social systems can use gender power inequalities to develop other power differences and historians must recognize these inequalities in order to reinterpret history. By providing possible analytical areas to understand how gender power inequalities influence other power structures, she challenges historians to look at situations differently and find a more comprehensive way to understand history through power inequalities.

It is important to note that Scott does not call for the end of the practice of archiving but rather she insists that historians need to answer how they think change is happening in history (42). Scott details how methods of historical analysis either put too much emphasis on gender inequalities or too much emphasis on socio-economic class inequalities. By dissecting current methods of historical analysis that incorporate gender in the context of other inequalities, she is able to recognize how different inequality issues are actually interconnected (42). Her method,

by recognizing the gender inequalities embedded in other societal hierarchies, pushes understandings of other power constructs such as race, ethnicity, and economy in history. She provides an example by explaining how politics and gender mold each other; cultural understandings of gender create laws and laws alter gender constructions (46). Her examples show that by making gender a category of analysis, she challenges the assumptions that power inequalities are separate spheres. Scott's understanding of the interconnectedness between different inequalities is important to recognize as she navigates her critiques of other analytical procedures. This framework can be used to look at any historical event and arguably help provide a comprehensive understanding of the event as well as challenge traditional presentations of historical knowledge. The U.S. historical account of the annexation of Hawaii can be used to illustrate Scott's point about using gender inequalities to find other power relationships. By understanding the economic motivations and political leadership at the time, the historical account of annexation of Hawaii can be revaluated through the lens of Scott's claim that gender is "a primary way of signifying relations of power" (44). This example provides a different understanding of the historic event and challenges preconceived notions about how change occurs.

The Kingdom of Hawaii was an archipelago in the Pacific Islands united during the rule of King Kamehameha. Eventually, settlers became very invested and dependent on the sugar economy through trade with the continental United States. At the time, King Kamehameha was open to supporting economic trade and worked to build relationships with sugar plantation owners. These initial connections made way for settlers to have more power and agency within the Native Hawaiian community. Western imperialism and religion also changed the social structures of the Native Hawaiian community, resulting in many counter movements to preserve

native cultures under the leadership of Queen Lilioukalani. This tension between Hawaiian Natives and non-Natives, particularly U.S. missionaries and financiers, led to the eventual disruption and eradication of the previous political system (Bravin 2009). The economic and political power inequalities between the two communities, which is represented by the collapse of Kingdom of Hawaii and its annexation to the United States, can be traced back to gender power inequalities.

The impact of missionaries and other settlers in Hawaii significantly altered the cultural norms and laws based on the Kapu system, which was based on ancient Hawaiian religious laws. After the removal of the Kapu system through the leadership of King Kamehameha I, who was aided by foreign advisors, different social structures brought by Protestant missionaries introduced new cultural practices (Kāwika & Ty 36). Through education, these practices became norms and eventually impacted the legislation of the time, outlawing many traditional Hawaiian practices and reinforcing the structures utilized by the settlers. By changing the gender norms and other cultural values, settlers were able to change Hawaiian society into something closer to their own power structures. This shift is a manifestation of power inequalities because it led to the erasure of indigenous culture and social customs.

By using Scott's method of using gender to signify changes in relationships of power, the shift in gender norms can be used to recognize the changes in power relations not only between Native Hawaiian men and women but also in the relationship between Natives and non-Natives (49). Through patriarchal social systems introduced by the Protestant missionaries and codified by White men, settlers gained more power than the Native Hawaiians. This power inequality can be recognized through the process by which women were being subjected to new norms influenced by new property and financial laws dictated by non-Natives. At the time, the

majority of sugar plantations were owned by white men who benefited from new land ownership laws. Their economic and organized labor system along with the backing of missionaries and U.S. financiers at the time worked together to overthrow the existing government (Bravin 2009). By removing the agency of Native Hawaiian women, power differences were reinforced by new laws concerning the land ownership rights and economic gain resulted in a loss of political agency of Native Hawaiians. This resulted in the control and restructuring of the economic system by white men. Eventually, they controlled the Kingdom of Hawaii (Bravin 2009).

Using Scott's framework of interrelated elements impacting gender (43), Queen Lilioukalani is an important subject in understanding how gender inequalities played a role in the annexation of Hawaii. Her status as a Hawaiian symbol, the value systems which impacted settler's understanding of her position, the political landscape, and her status as a leader all interrelate and exemplify Scott's analytic method. By undermining her leadership abilities due to her gender, the political leaders and financial investors were able to lessen the economic and political agency of Indigenous Hawaiians. Queen Lilioukalani herself argued that they were uncomfortable with her as a leader due to her gender (Lilioukalani 278). Not only did missionaries have their own assumptions about gender roles, their impact also led to this understanding being spread throughout the Islands' communities. Queen Lilioukalani argued that her abdication was partially caused by men who were uncomfortable with her leadership because of her gender. They used understandings about gender differences to develop arguments against her competency as a female ruler. Although they undermined her politically, they actually used existing gender inequalities to formulate political power inequalities. This supports Scott's claim not only that all inequalities are interconnected but also can be signified by gender power differences.

As seen in this example with Hawaii, Scott's framework can help reevaluate power inequalities in history. By understanding how economic resources were controlled by white men and how religious authorities transformed cultural norms, there is an option to analyze these events by looking at the existence of gender power inequalities. This challenges the dominant historical narratives and through a lens of gender, a different analysis of history emerges. Scott is very clear when she explains how history must be challenged; through using gender as a category of analysis, historians will help give a more comprehensive understanding of how society has changed through time. Learning about differences can lead to knowledge about communities and identities about which very little has been written. Scott's approach to understanding power in history requires the ability to see interconnectedness and to recognize when gender inequalities impact the changes during that time.

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