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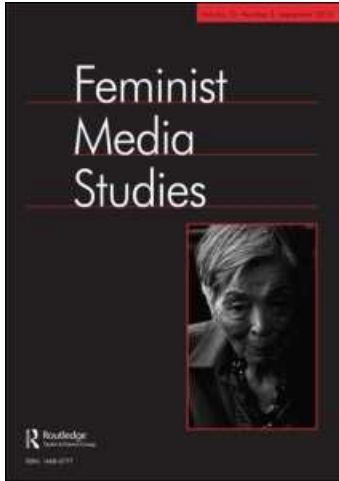
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UNVEILING FRANCE'S BORDER STRATEGIES

Gender and the politics of the headscarf ban

Angela McRobbie

This essay examines some of the issues at stake in the foregrounding in France of the teenage Muslim girl wearing what has come to be known, in common parlance, as a "headscarf." In particular, the focus of attention is on the recent book by the American feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott (2007) who has done a remarkable job in dissecting the outcry in France caused by the presence of such girls wishing to wear the "veil" or *foulard* at school. But before engaging directly with Scott I want to draw attention to a veritable temptation to adopt a crudely comparative perspective in relation to what Scott sees as a deeply embedded racism directed to people of North African origin of which the question of the veil is the tip of an iceberg. So antipathetic is French political thought to notions of everyday multiculturalism that the levels of hostility and opposition to women wearing the *hijab* strikes those more familiar with, for example, UK recognition of cultural differences expressed in this way, as particularly alarming and even disgraceful. Succumbing to such a stance, however, runs the risk of either setting up some kind of sliding scale of European racism and tolerance, or it deflects attention away from the intersection of prejudicial practices as they take specific and distinctive forms across countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, France, and the UK as part of concerted effort on the part of government to be seen to be dealing simultaneously with the perceived threat posed by Islamic values and with immigration. The distinct contours of the European political discourses which arise in response to these various threats and the ways in which they cross-fertilise and contest each other, often with degrees of self-righteousness, is itself an important subject for further discussion. And that Britain is perceived as having permitted "multiculturalism" to grow unabated has now entered the realms of racist common-sense discourse in various high-ranking political institutions.¹ For these reasons, I find myself holding in check a desire to emphasise the achievements of multiculturalism in the UK, bearing in mind of course the fact that this comes from years of hard and unrelenting struggle on the part of black British and Asian people along with anti-racist groups, teachers, intellectuals, artists, writers, and diverse campaigners over a period of more than fifty years.

For the purposes of this current discussion, however, I will focus on Scott's *The Politics of the Veil* (2007), the contents of which cannot fail to astound readers who are unfamiliar with the way in which, from the early 1990s onwards (though also dating back to the rise

of the right-wing French Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1983), French governments have pursued a course of action which in effect racially punishes young Muslim women who wear the headscarf, culminating in a ban on it being worn in the classroom in 2004. It also seems that within the realms of public debate voices of opposition in France were muted. Many of those who did oppose the ban, nevertheless agreed in principle with the overarching aims of secularism, and simply argued that this was not the best way to achieve such a goal, claiming that it was better to have the girls in schools wearing their headscarves and hope that an enlightened education will rub off and drive their beliefs into a more private space.

Scott does a good job of putting *laïcité* (secularism or the separation of the church or religion and the state) in a historical context wherein from the late nineteenth century the demands of the Catholic faith, and the power of the priests, particularly over women, were curtailed and legislated against through the ideals of *laïcité* in the French school system (I will return to the question of *laïcité* in the conclusion). The current fervent upholding of the principles of secularism within the secondary school system, which in turn remains the crucible for the ethos of the republican values of a "one and indivisible" nation, appears, in Scott's account, to be in effect a virulent form of neo-nationalism, a means of remaining, somehow in the light of globalisation and the recent flows of migration, uncontaminated by other cultures and peoples. It is in effect a border strategy. There seems to be little or no space for negotiation in this terrain, which in turn means that immigrants and French citizens of African origin have no alternative but to espouse patriotism for a host country which defines their own culture of origin as inferior and irrelevant to the contemporary nation state. Indeed it is openly stated across public discourse that it is precisely "their culture" which is the problem, and adherence to its values are what holds non-white French people back from achieving a better standard of living and higher levels of education. This great social anxiety spread about girls wearing the veil is massively disproportionate to the numbers who actually wear the headscarf in France, which as Scott reminds her readers is just 14 percent of Muslim women. And this is even more the case for the recent ban, in 2010, against the *burkha*. The hysterical reaction becomes phantasmatic; all kinds of other things are at stake, including post-colonial guilt, a desire to bury the memory of the past especially in Algeria, and to deny the reality of the legal status of North African French people. The so-called war against terror is constantly invoked to spread fear and anxiety, such that a hard and fast line is drawn between the upright French citizen and the dangerous immigrant, the Arab boys in the suburbs and the girls in scarves. This battle then has other long-term agendas which, I would argue, become symptomatic of a singularly French pathway to anti-immigrant neo-liberalism. While consistently drawing on the French republican ethos which elevates oneness and indivisibility against any form of group interest or "communalism," the French government appears to be assembling a mass of public opinion for authoritarian ends (Scott traces this to the success of Le Pen, and the subsequent attempts by other political parties to reclaim ground lost by being seen to tackle immigration).

Media attention comes to be directed to just a handful of particularly dramatic cases. And, as Scott shows, in France this occurred when two teenage sisters converted to Islam and tested the power of the state in their bid to have their new faith recognised without being expelled from school. The Levy sisters grew up in a leftist secular Jewish family whose parents divorced and whose grandmother weighed into the public scene to argue that the divorce was the trigger for their conversion and their new spirituality. The Muslim girl and

her spirituality, taken as a sign of submission and coercion, becomes the subject of strong current of racialising governmentality, animated and brought up to date by the calculated application of a kind of liberal feminism. Contrary to her wishes, but in her best interests, the teenage Muslim girl is required to be liberated. And, in a wildly unanticipated outcome of previous feminist struggles, the government, congratulating itself for having granted indigenous French women gender equality, now, paternalistically, seeks to impose similar freedoms on Muslim women and girls as a condition of their citizenship. Feminism (of sorts) is subjected to the logic of a neo-liberal anti-immigrant form of governmentality. But it goes further than this and enters the realm of the everyday culture of the nation since the Muslim girl, unveiled, is also called upon to be, like her western counterparts, pleasing to the male eye. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of Scott's book. In the chapter on sexuality, she dissects how one dynamic of the public debate centred on a women's (new-found) right to be desirable (along with the male right to find pleasure in looking at young women), and how this was thwarted by the wearing of the veil which it was assumed was worn not out of choice but on the instructions of fathers or brothers. Again a feminist-inflected ideal, the right to (hetero-)sexual pleasure, in an everyday sense, on the street and in public places, was conjured as a mark of contemporary French modernity. This suggested that men and women nowadays ought to be able to enjoy the sight of each other and this is synonymous with sexual health and citizenship.

To an extent this parallels some of the arguments I propose in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (Angela McRobbie 2008). Under the New Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair there was a concerted attempt to bring young women on board and issue them with a new kind of sexual contract which offered sexual pleasure with impunity, and which also offered the ideals of education and employment, and a disposable income allowing access to consumer culture, on the grounds of a kind of political quietude, a trading of the possibility of autonomous or self-determined feminist politics in favour of this new package of entitlements. In this, and in the French case, the potential of young womanhood to the contemporary social order is recognised as meriting strong political intervention, while also allowing the government in question to appear to be modern and pro-feminist. In actuality it usurps and substitutes for new possible feminisms by openly denigrating what feminism once was (in Blair parlance it was "wimmin," i.e., the sexually unattractive), while seeming to bestow on women something of a governmental largesse or revamped paternalism. It becomes the definer and distributor of women's freedoms. An autonomous, or grass roots, feminism is increasingly unthinkable for the reason that nowadays government shows itself to be the best ally of women, filling the space which a now anachronistic feminism once occupied.

Scott examines the contradictions within the French notion of abstract individualism and the question of difference (and in doing this draws on and extends her own highly regarded work on the history of feminism in France) (Scott 1996). French women only got the vote in 1945 and this was won nevertheless on the basis of their difference being naturalised; they were "the sex" and for this reason their status was as a group. But since French republican values stress oneness and indivisibility, gender equality could only be achieved if it could be reconciled with abstract individualism. Women remained "the sex," while gaining equality as the counterparts of men. Nowadays the law of parity requires equal numbers of men and women for election to political office. And, more recently, gender equality finds itself raised to the status, like *laïcité*, of a founding value of which current French President Nicolas Sarkozy is proud. Despite this, the sexism which

disparages the political campaign of Ségolène Royal as a “beauty contest,” and which also routinely expects women to publicly display their difference in visually pleasing ways, is extended to deal with the Muslim girls who are either seen as intransigent in their refusal to conform with this already existing double standard, or who are seen as forced into invisibility, which in turn is understood to reflect the sexual perversity and inferiority of Islamic culture. Scott suggests that despite the “pious talk,” men in France are uncomfortable about these new forms of power-sharing with women. This needs further unpacking since what appears to be happening is a new form of patriarchal retrenchment lurking behind the normalising power of the fashion and beauty industry along with consumer culture which women now enjoy as a “personal choice” (McRobbie 2008). The disciplinary features of the prevailing beauty culture in France show how a French post-feminist masquerade has inserted itself as a new norm of contemporary femininity. Women themselves defuse the threat to men, posed by their seeming equality and participation in work, by beautifying themselves in excess, to the point that professional identity and achievement in the field of employment are reassuringly diminished by extravagant shows of flirtatious behaviour, and by the paraphernalia of fashion and accessories in much the same way as Joan Rivière described in her classic 1929 essay.² Now, however, femininity is performed with a hint of irony, as though to signal this is a self-chosen form of feminine conduct. In this post-feminist way, women confirm to men that gender hierarchies are still intact, despite their presence in political office and in employment, and despite their ability nowadays, thanks to education, to earn their own living. In reality, women are encouraged, on pain of male disapproval and condemnation, to comply with the requirement to provide a delightful visual spectacle for men, in public spaces, which further compounds the disapproval directed towards their Muslim counterparts who wear headscarves and thus do not make themselves available for male consumption in this way. New, more subtle, post-feminist forms of sexism work to the disadvantage of women across the boundaries of race and religion.

The Politics of the Veil encompasses this terrain of contemporary debate while also addressing the history of France’s relationship with its former colonies in North Africa. The phantasmatic place occupied by the idea of the veil and the exoticised and reviled body of the veiled woman in mainland France is inextricably linked with the Algerian war and the violent and bitter struggle for independence. It was Frantz Fanon (1967) who said that France was “bent on unveiling Algeria.” Scott traces the contours of these struggles beyond independence to the present day and shows how deep-rooted is the fear and antagonism on the part of the French establishment and the political classes to Arab peoples and to those of North African descent. The Stasi Commission set up to investigate the meaning of the veil in contemporary France was able to line up a wide range of experts, including various French Muslim feminists, so that the passing of the law in 2004, requiring girls to remove the headscarf as they entered the classrooms of all French schools, was relatively unproblematic. Scott also pays attention to the few voices of Muslim girls themselves recorded for publication in a handful of books and there, contrary to the views of the experts, we see insistence on personal choice in the wearing of the headscarf, and a search for spirituality on the part of the girls interviewed.

But to return to the question of *laïcité*, it may be that Scott could have gone further in her unpacking of the place of secularism within the French school system and in republican political theory. Her account of the break with Catholicism is perhaps truncated and as a result she does not engage with the deep afterlife of Catholicism within the secular value

system of which France is so proud. This, in turn, means that she does not examine how a resurgent Catholicism, across the borders of many European countries, becomes part of the otherwise seemingly secular struggle against Islam.³ As Judith Butler (2004, 2008) has shown on more than one occasion, the norms of family life which are integral to the French notion of symbolic order, which in turn bestows cultural and legal intelligibility on persons, are derived from and remain broadly compatible with Vatican strictures. In effect, the secular state promotes a hierarchy of religions, with the Christian and Judaic religions unapologetically superior.⁴ Secularism is posed as the most advanced and modern form of statehood which is able to act coercively on what is perceived as a lesser form of faith. Butler goes further and shows how, in the name of a dogmatic secularism, state violence is perpetrated against Muslim culture through forms of exclusion and through an understanding of Islam as necessarily backward and mired in "tradition"—it is, she says, understood as a "terrible anachronism." She argues that sexuality has come to occupy a critical space in this new civilising mission, thereby forcing a wedge between possible alliances among those concerned with both gender and with anti-racist struggles. At the very least, this aggressive devaluing of Islam can only create a more polarised and divided social life with, in this case, young girls bearing the brunt of disdain, pity, animosity, and assumed victimhood on the part of the social institutions. (Scott refers to the wide realm of public opinion and common sense which condemns veil-wearing even where the ban does not apply.)

To sum up, I would suggest that contrary to what was recently argued by Gregor McLennan (2010), the tenor of this debate is not about so-called post-colonial post-secularism. Instead, both Scott (2007) and Butler (2008) make important contributions to a feminist scholarship which disentangles the often persuasive rhetoric which claims women's rights as deliverable only by European modernity, and which therefore requests of women unswerving loyalty to this tradition. (We might go further and see this as a new disciplinary technique.) Nor is this argumentation, in Butler's case, mere polemic as McLennan rather sardonically suggests. In reading Scott's *The Politics of the Veil* we get a sense of the prevailing, complacent and animated discourse around the dinner tables of the French "chattering classes" which finds a new way of vindicating imperial reason through recourse to the "poor girls" whose opinions are never themselves sought, and who for this reason, rather than that of the veil or headscarf, remain hidden from view. As Scott also points out, by focusing exclusively on this oppressed image of veiled young womanhood various other social issues are circumvented and ignored, in particular the entrapment of young non-white French people in poor housing and in inadequate schools where teachers are not in any way required or expected to engage with cultural difference and who, as a result, implicitly if not explicitly respond to expressions of cultural difference in a denigratory fashion. In such a context, endemic social conflict, violence, and an intensification of policing can be the only expected outcome (see also Loïc Wacquant 2009).

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NOTES

1. Cardinal Walter Kasper, a senior papal aide, withdrew from the Pope's visit to the UK following a disparaging comment about arriving in the UK being like a "third world country" which Vatican sources then said referred to "the UK's multicultural society" (*BBC News* 2010).
2. See Rivière ([1929] 1986). The UK press regularly runs double-paged glossy features itemising the immaculate appearance of French political figures like Rachida Dati, former Minister of Justice, and even the more obviously middle-aged Christine Lagarde, Minister of Economic Affairs, is admired for her flirtatious appearances on BBC 2's *Newsnight*.
3. See Butler's (2008) account of Papal denunciations of Islam.
4. This is visible in the vast amount of media coverage of, as well as state welcome for, the Pope's visit to the UK from 16–19 September, 2010. Live Mass was broadcast on the main television channels, as well as uninterrupted daytime coverage of the Pope's visit to Scotland.

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