

Readings in European History: Essay 3

“Western feminism is constituted by the discursive practices of democratic politics that have equated individuality with masculinity.”¹ In Joan Wallach Scotts exploratory monograph, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, the investigation into the meanings of French citizenship and its consequential procurement of political agency offer a refreshing, more nuanced gaze at feminist history. For Scott, an American historian studying France, the subtle contradictions between liberty, citizenship, and overarching masculinity underscore a critical, less discussed proponent of the French historical canon: women’s roles in the functionality of governing structures. By meticulously highlighting these “sexual paradoxes,” Scott delivered academic historiography with a critical step in carving out a space for the narratives and tribulations of France’s most controversial liberal feminists. More pressing, however, what does Scott’s important contribution to historical discourse offer historians examining the second-wave feminist movement in American history? The concise answer lies in Scott’s careful examination of specific feminists, their achievements, and how these various women represented more structural and overarching transformations of the French sociopolitical order. Employing Scott’s linear, analytical methodology to the study of the second-wave feminist movement and her focus on specific feminists, therefore, offers the historiographical record with a renewed, more precise understanding of how this social movement impacted marriage, patriarchy, and structural ideas of misogyny.

For the historian Joan Wallach Scott, the perusal into the feminist history of France’s most notorious, foundation-shaking female activists underscored a significant glimpse into the inter-workings of both French government and its misogynistic notions of citizenship. Feminist

¹ Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5.

history, a branch of social history that outlines and explores the narratives of women left out of previous historical cataloging, remains an essential portion of what scholars have deemed “new history.” The understanding of this specific, more investigative historical trekking offered Scott a different perspective in mapping French politics and its subsequent exclusion of women. According to Scott, the very beginnings of French democracy, and the subsequent republics that would follow, presented political organizers with an ideological conundrum. In 1789, the ratification of “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” stated that every Frenchman, regardless of class or status, existed as a citizen with certain unalienable rights. The term “individual” now played a critical role in these newly classified citizens’ political consciousness.² However, if the law determined that all within France had the right to enact political agency, should women participate in these new structures? More questions such as these arose when women, like Olympe de Gouges, challenged misogynistic notions that their gender canceled their claims to agency, stirring the discourse on the discrepancies between individualism and what Scott labels as the “sexual difference.”³ Individualism detailed that men, regardless of their economic, social, or perhaps even religious differences, still provided the advancement of humanity and the human experience; all lives had worth under this definition of individualism. However, this connotation of the “individual” remained ambiguous and abstract. Feminists across France, confused by this structural cognitive dissonance, understood that the state gendered these claims of individuality- forging this concept into a masculine, misogynistic construct that excluded women from the political discourse.⁴

² Ibid, 19-22.

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴ Ibid, 5, 20.

Therefore, examining the paradox of the “second sex” allowed Scott’s methodology to unveil.⁵ The careful examination of specific French feminists, like Olympe de Gouges and Jeanne Deroin, detailed her mapping of feminist history through France’s various governing structures. More specifically, the focus on key individuals in the quest to obtain suffrage encapsulates the social attitudes of gender and liberty that suppressed women from engaging in political discourse. For example, de Gouges, a notorious feminist of post-revolutionary France, continually sent letters to Maximillian Robespierre describing her frustration with her status as a second-class “citizen.” According to Gouges, the French state’s hypocritical attitudes towards women detailed the key misogynistic foundations of governing institutions.⁶ As the new democracy offered women unilateral divorce 1792, de Gouges argued that there remained little justification for excluding women in politics.⁷ If women could legally seek divorce on their terms due to the law labeling these women as civil agents, then why did the concept of suffrage remain exclusively masculine? These contradictions, contradictions that treated women as both objects and subjects, underscored the feminist ideology with its primary goal- suffrage. Specific actions, such as the various correspondences between Robespierre and de Gouges, offer the historiographic record essential insights. Scott, who described in detail the tribulations of de Gouges, skillfully highlighted the sociopolitical structures of post-revolutionary France.

For investigating historians, the interpretation of de Gouges’ life offers an invaluable tool in gauging French structures of misogyny. This important facet of social history remains key in Scott’s methodological survey. By painting her focus on specific women, such as de Gouges, and using the linear timetable of feminist activism through various eras in French history, not only are the misogynistic paradoxes of citizenship and individuality explored, a panorama of the

⁵ Ibid, 7-10.

⁶ Ibid, 20-25.

⁷ Ibid.

functionality and sociopolitical sensibilities of the ordinary people becomes pronounced. Furthermore, the implementation of key primary source documents, such as the contentious letters between Robespierre and de Gouges, gives Scott's methodology an incredible authority. Feminist history, as Scott maintained, isn't the perusal into the lives of a few mutinous women; rather, a better portrait of feminist history arises when scholars use these key accounts to create the backdrop of society.⁸ Just as Scott used the narratives and sources left behind by women to discuss these sexual paradoxes, other scholars engaging in feminist history must employ similar tactics when investigating women's roles within the historiographic record.

For scholars investigating the advent, evolution, and consequences of the second-wave feminist movement in America, Scott's methodology offers an intriguing, fresher comprehension of this explosive social movement. The second-wave feminist movement finds its beginnings with the cessation of World War II. During the global conflict, American women tossed aside their strict cages of femininity to aid the American war-machine in conquering the Axis powers. Trading their domestic duties for positions in industry, women during the war transformed the meanings of femininity. Women began working on assembly lines, manufacturing warheads, ammunition, and steel for American battleships.⁹ While undoubtedly beneficial to the Allied victory in 1945, their contributions to industry did not last after the war. The genesis of this feminist movement inaugurates with the overarching and compulsory misogyny found throughout all of America's structures.

American women, and more specifically white women, transformed into servants of the domestic sphere, their value as humans became equated to motherhood and raising families. Throughout the 1950s, and even into the 1960s, women across America found that most forms of

⁸ Ibid, 21-29.

⁹ Blanche Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green, *American Women in the 1960's: Changing the Future* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 122-133.

prestigious employment only held spaces for men, the dominators of the public realm. Women belonged in the domestic world; they existed as objects to masculine sexual appetites and caregivers to the newly contrived nuclear family. While not all women had the privilege to isolate themselves within the home, their participation within enterprise, government, and medicine remained ridiculed. Notions that women deserved careers, education, or autonomy were scoffed at by misogynist standards of gender; women had two duties, motherhood, and domestic work.¹⁰ For the second-wave feminist movement, scoping out these hypocrisies within society coalesced into political, grass-roots activism. More importantly, however, the production of feminist literature, designed to question the gender binary and its strict constructions, boosted feminist sentiment across the nation. The crafting of *The Feminine Mystique* by liberal feminist Betty Friedan in 1963 offered these disenfranchised, disgruntled women an answer to what Friedan wrote as “the problem with no name.”¹¹ This problem underlined the despair, boredom, and longing for something more than just motherhood and wifely duties. Friedan’s explosive memoir resonated with women across the country, women in California intrinsically understood this latent problem in the same manner as women in Kansas.¹² *The Feminine Mystique*, while not the only driving force behind the next feminist movement, ushered in an important indoctrination of feminist ideology to the average women.

Unlike the feminist movements found in the nineteenth-century, this new-age movement heralded that women deserved a place in the workforce, in government, and most importantly, were sexual beings equal to their male counterparts. This contemporary struggle for women’s

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), 1-2.

¹² Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the Twentieth-Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 19-21.

equality also took massive strides in the inclusion of all women.¹³ Intersectionality, a term that underscored differing manners of oppression and structural marginalization between women of color, gay women, and white women, allowed this movement to differentiate itself from its predecessor. Moreover, just as the first-wave movement produced famous women like Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott, the movement observed in the 1970s saw vigilant women like Gloria Steinem and Angela Davis combat misogynistic power structures.

Issues arise, however, when historians focus their attention on this social movement. Firstly, many scholars have not examined the intricate nuances that these feminist campaigns created. Within historiography, for example, understanding and analyzing women's roles in the nineteenth century takes higher precedence than its twentieth century counterpart. Perhaps this is due to the recent nature of this history and the fact that women that participated in this moment still recount their experiences today. This living memory factor has left many historians to turn their attention to studying the origins of gender constraints within America rather than focusing on these advocates for social change. While there are historical accounts of these women, like Gloria Steinem, these accounts are comparatively minimal within the historical record compared to the academic literature detailing nineteenth century feminists.

The perusal into the marriage politics found within the Victorian-age has denoted that many American women's historians continually skip-over the study of this second-wave feminist movement. For example, Hendrik Hartog gave a panorama of marriage dynamics in his lecture "Marital Exits and Marital Expectations in Nineteenth Century America." Within this work, Hartog outlined how gender, the Cult of Domesticity, and heterosexual romance controlled the daily lives of American citizens. Hartog gives evidence for why marriage has manifested into

¹³ Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, *Women's Voices and Feminist Visions* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015), 4-10.

the phenomenon it is today. More importantly, however, Hartog highlighted that marriage crafted men and women into entities of public consumption. This consecration of the masculine and feminine image into public entities served to conjoin these ideas of gender rather than craft them as individuals.¹⁴ Moreover, according to Hartog, our modern perception of marriage, and womanhood, strengthens when historians utilize these transformative constructions in gauging how matrimony, feminism, and women evolved in the twentieth century.¹⁵

The historiography surrounding the second-wave feminist movement plainly shows significant gaps in trekking the history of these feminists specifically. As aforementioned, because so many of these feminists exist as living memory, their accounts, and subsequent memoirs take precedence over the secondary source material. Therefore, Scott's method of studying these individual feminists, like Steinem, remains essential for investigating historians. Take, for example, the activism of Gloria Steinem during the sexual revolution of the 1970s. As a college-educated woman, Steinem found employment at the feminist publication, *Miss Magazine*.¹⁶ Both talented and innovative, Steinem hoped to expose the rampant sexism perpetuated within the company *Playboy*. Going undercover as an employee of Hugh Hefner, the editor-in-chief of *Playboy Magazine*, Steinem crafted an expose on the misogyny she experienced during her time as one of these Playboy "Bunnies." In her article "A Bunny's Tale," Steinem recounted that she experienced sexual harassment from men touching her inappropriately, calling her offensive names, and the hyper-sexualization of the women working as waitresses.¹⁷ Furthermore, by exposing the blatant misogyny she experienced as one of Hefner's employees, Steinem cemented herself at the head of this growing feminist movement.

¹⁴ Hendrik A. Hartog et al, "Marital Exits and Marital Expectations in Nineteenth Century America," University of Wisconsin Law School, 1991.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gloria Steinem, "A Bunny's Tale," *Show Magazine*, May 1963.

¹⁷ Ibid.

For scholars attempting to trace the history of this feminist movement through the utilization of Scott's methodology, Steinem's accounts offer an interesting, and perhaps controversial, a mechanism for historical interpretation. As a branch of social history, feminist history underscores the lives, legacies, and impacts of feminists and feminist movements. Therefore, this metaphorical historian must ask themselves several pressing questions when interacting with these primary sources. What does Steinem's work at *Playboy* detail about the general public's attitudes toward women? What can her activism show scholars about the gains of feminist ideology? What biases do Steinem and her contemporaries suffer from, and how do these biases impact social change? These perplexing questions go beyond the life and work of one feminist because they dive into the very foundations of the feminist movement as a whole. While works like Steinem's offer important primary source accounts, feminist historians following Scott's methodology must chain them to the overarching theme of intersectional feminism, a product of the second-wave feminist movement. Furthermore, just as Scott employed the experiences of women like de Gournes to underscore the social context for which feminism developed and evolved, other feminist historians must use specific accounts to craft the history of this twentieth century feminist movement.

The number of conclusions that historians using Scott's methodology may find when studying the second-wave feminist movement remain unknown. However, just as Scott detailed the tumultuous struggle for women's suffrage found throughout French history by studying the lives, narratives, and victories of French feminists, a modern historian could find important accounts and interpretations when engaging with the second-wave feminist movement. More specifically, a possible conclusion may illuminate the effects of other liberation movements on feminist discourse. Take, for example, the notable Marxist-feminist Angela Davis. As an

outspoken advocate participating in both the feminist movement and Civil Rights discourse, Davis presented the perfect example of why intersectionality, and communication, between these groups had on structural augmentations. However, for a historian using her account to reach conclusions on these movements' effectiveness and their relationship to one another, Davis' narratives offer a glimpse into how effective Scott's methodology remains. An account, such as Davis', offers significant insight into how the members of the Civil Rights Movement and feminists activists viewed, experienced, and interacted with other groups during the civil turmoil of the 1970s¹⁸. Furthermore, using Davis' narratives helps to provide both social context, intersectional analysis, and could paint a fuller picture of how this movement impacted society as a whole. This analysis offers a more thorough understanding of not just the groups participating in civil disobedience, such as the factional sect of radical feminism that Davis found herself, but also catalog how average Americans interpreted these challenges to the status quo. Lastly, due to the incredible amount of primary source material available, employing Scott's methodology on the history of the second-wave feminist movement offers a better understanding of both the key players in the fight against misogyny and the social context in which this movement evolved.

Historians utilizing this specific methodology, the linear trekking of specific lives to paint the portrait of society and events, find that the feminist movement did not end as successfully as many feminists would have desired. The failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 readily proves this claim.¹⁹ In understanding these failings of social campaigns of the 1970s, academic historians employing Scott's methodology opens a Pandora's box of burning questions.

¹⁸ Becky Thompson et al. "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies Vol. 28, No. 2, Second Wave Feminism in the United States* (2002): 338-350.

¹⁹ Karma Chávez, Yasmin Nair, and Ryan Conrad, "Equality, Sameness, Difference: Revisiting the Equal Rights Amendment," no. 3 (2015): 272.

Most pressing, why these movements didn't reach all of their goals comes into focus. The frequent ideological disagreements between different social movements, like the Gay Liberation Movement and the Black Panther Movement, impeded social augmentation. Moreover, as historians begin studying individual accounts and their impacts on a broader setting, they could potentially underscore how this apparent in-fighting between factional groups allowed for the general public's weariness at liberal social movements. This weariness manifested when analyzing the conservative resurgence of the 1980s, the advent of staunch anti-feminism from women like Phyllis Schlafly, and how these activists found their advances repelled by the new Republican leadership.²⁰

The implementation of Scott's methodology offers the historiographic record a different way of approaching social, feminist, and perhaps even women's history. Just as Scott utilized the narratives of women like Olympe de Gouges to paint the portrait of post-revolutionary France, the careful study of feminists like Gloria Steinem and her activism offers a better understanding of the social context which the second-wave feminist movement existed. Scott's monograph, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, characterized various feminists and their struggle to achieve suffrage. Throughout these accounts, each epoch of French sociopolitical history fell into a more explicit focus. Scott exploited the narratives of French feminists to detail the "paradoxes" of citizenship and the foundations of structural misogyny. Therefore, investigating historians hoping to interpret and better understand of the second-wave feminist movement's subtle nuances must employ Scott's methodological tactics to carve out a clear picture of 1970s America. Employing Scott's linear, analytical methodology to the study of the second-wave feminist movement and her focus on specific feminists, therefore, offers the historiographical record with a renewed,

²⁰ Phyllis Schlafly, "Experts from *The Power of the Positive Woman*," in *Antifeminism in America: Reaction to the Modern Women's Movement, 1963 to the Present*, ed. Angela Howard and Sasah Ranaé Adams Tarrant (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 101-114.

more precise understanding of how this social movement impacted marriage, patriarchy, and structural ideas of misogyny.

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