



The many futures of gender  
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## **Gender is always a question**

**A conversation with Joan W. Scott**

Patricia Purtschert

### **About the many futures of gender**

The aim of the project is to tell and reflect the different histories of feminist theory. To this end, conversations are held with protagonists who had and have a formative influence on feminist theories. In engaging with these scholars, we wish to delve deeper not only into the ideas and concepts that form the key basis of these theories but also to explore the historical contexts, collective thinking, political practices, and historical controversies that enabled them at the time. The conversations bring forth exigent questions around power, inequality, and violence, intersectionality, the relation of sex, gender, and sexuality, or the critique of binary thinking. We discuss the contributions of feminism to analyzing and challenging significant differences other than gender, such as race, class, nationality, religion, and caste. The project is rooted in oral history and philosophical exchange. It has value for those of us interested in the history of feminist theory and in feminism as a resourceful way of challenging dominant knowledges and creating different ones.

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## Gender is always a question: A conversation with Joan W. Scott

Patricia Purtschert

**The pandemic had completely changed my ideas and plans for this oral history project. Instead of traveling to places and interviewing feminist scholars, I found myself at home, waiting for the situation to get better. Finally, I reluctantly decided to try out online interviews. In April 2021 I wrote to Joan Scott and asked her, shyly, if she would agree to talk to me on Zoom. Her answer was in my inbox one day later: “I’d love to do an interview with you, that is exactly the kind of thing I do have energy for these days.” My heart was jumping. The project would go on. Soon after, we began our conversation.**

*Patricia Purtschert: Dear Joan, can you remember when you first came across the term “gender”?*

Joan Scott: I cannot remember a first encounter. Although I would say it probably was in between 1980 and 1985 when I wrote my gender article. And I think what I thought was that it solved a problem for me about writing women’s history. Because women’s history, although it was a necessary step in the feminist recovery of history, always felt too narrowly focused on women, rather than on the analytic possibilities of what it meant that women were excluded or included in things at various points in the histories that I taught.

*Can you remember in what way you were introduced to the term, through which texts for example?*

I have no memory. It was there. People were using it; I do not think I read any particular text. Does Gayle Rubin use it?

Yes.

So maybe through that. It was maybe Gayle Rubin.

*And before, there was Ann Oakley’s book.<sup>1</sup>*

Oakley, right. It was probably Gayle Rubin’s article “The traffic in women,”<sup>2</sup> which I read with interest and excitement, because it offered a possibility of thinking women’s history in an analytic, not just in a descriptive way. But I do not have any kind of “Eureka!” moment. I think the term was just there and then ... we started using it.

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1 Ann Oakley, *Sex, gender and society* (1972).

2 Gayle Rubin, *The traffic in women: Notes on the “political economy” of sex* (1975).

*You mentioned that the term allowed you to think certain things that were not possible within the framework of women's history. That is what you explore in your seminal paper from 1986, "Gender: A useful category of historical analysis."<sup>3</sup> In the article, you mention that "gender has emerged at a moment of great epistemological turmoil" (p. 1066). What did you mean by that?*

I mean that there were great debates among feminists about using the term at all. Gender insisted on how the relationship between men and women was constructed. Would it detract from the attention to women that women's history and women's studies more generally had produced? And if so, what would that mean? And then there were huge fights about renaming programs: Is this a "women's history program," is this a "feminist history program" ... or a "gender program"? If we call it gender, what happens to the women and feminist component of it? There was great turmoil in that period about the usability of the term and it was connected, of course, to the ways in which theory could or could not be used to understand women's history: To what extent was it enough to "make women visible," documenting their agency throughout history? To what extent could we go beyond attributing women's invisibility to "patriarchy" without more analysis of how structures of inequality were constructed and maintained? How to account for change, on the one hand, and the persistence of discrimination against women on the other? These were some of the contested issues as "gender" made its appearance as an analytic category.

*It was feared that with gender women would once again disappear from view?*

Yes. Even though the other side of that was that there were so many books written with "gender" in the title which were just women's history. For some, gender became a euphemism for women in scholarship that could get more serious consideration, than "women" could get. So, the politics of that were extremely difficult to negotiate.

Added to that was the question of theory for feminist scholarship. There was an article that Laura Lee Downs wrote, which was called "If 'woman' is just an empty category, then why am I afraid to walk alone at night? Identity politics meets the postmodern subject."<sup>4</sup> It was an attack on me, among other people, for disappearing women in the interest of theory. The clash between theory and empiricism was at the heart of these conversations.

*There are some striking similarities to the German-speaking context, where similar debates took place a few years later, when Judith Butler's Gender trouble<sup>5</sup> came out. The feminist historian Barbara Duden wrote an article with the title "Die Frau ohne Unterleib: Zu Judith Butlers Entkörperung"<sup>6</sup> ("The woman without a womb: On Judith Butler's disembodiment") claiming that the relation to the materiality of the body is completely missing.*

3 Joan Scott, *Gender: A useful category of historical analysis* (1986).

4 Laura Lee Downs, *If "woman" is just an empty category, then why am I afraid to walk alone at night? Identity politics meets the postmodern subject* (1993).

5 Judith Butler, *Gender trouble* (1989).

6 Barbara Duden, *Die Frau ohne Unterleib: Zu Judith Butlers Entkörperung; Ein Zeitdokument* (1993).

And, you know, in some ways that continues. The resistance to theory remains an undercurrent, even as gender is now more accepted. It has become acceptable, but the tension between the empirical and theoretical continues. It is like a subterranean tension that never really went away.

*I did not read your article as writing against the empirical but as an attempt to reach out to new areas of history that had been neglected by women's history, especially to the political. For me it was not so much about "Let's talk about men as well, and the relationship between men and women"—even though that is part of what gender as a concept can do. To me, the message was: "As feminist historians, let's not get stuck within the areas that are ascribed to women traditionally, namely the home, the private, the social." Because there is a lot that we can find out about the political, the economical, and so on, if we take gender seriously. In that way, it was also an empirical claim, or a claim to keep working empirically, but within a different field, which was opened up by the theoretical shift that you suggested.*

Yes, it was meant to be that! That is absolutely right, it was meant to say "These are the questions we need to ask; we are not asking enough questions, it is not enough to make women visible." But I do not think it was an entirely empirical claim. The point was that we needed to have an analytic frame with which to identify what material we needed and then to understand the empirical material that we were uncovering. So, instead of asking "What did women do in this period?" or "What was women's experience?" we needed to say "What were the social, cultural, and political, understandings of the relations between the sexes, that *put* women in this particular position?" This does not change the description of the position or the work that was or was not available to women, but it puts it in a larger analytic frame that lets you understand the power dynamics. It is not just a matter of documenting women's experience, but of asking how that experience was created and maintained.

*Do you find it frustrating that one ended up having these divisions so often? Between the empirical and the theoretical? The body and language?*

Yes. It was always frustrating that it had to be that kind of argument, but I think it is inevitable. That is the way scholarship progresses, orthodoxies get challenged, new frameworks emerge.

*But then also, a lot of people took up your article in a really creative and productive way.*

Yes, it was both. There were times that I would read an article in the field of, let us call it gender studies, and there would be a footnote to my article in the beginning, saying "I'm following ..." and then I would read the article and say "No, no influence whatsoever of what I was trying to say." And, on the other hand, there was the exciting experience of reading something which really took up my suggestions and worked with them, to do whatever the article or book was doing, as a way of analyzing a particular moment of history, or particular set of relationships or developments.

*Let us move to the book that came out afterwards, *Only paradoxes to offer*.<sup>7</sup> It is one of my favorite books, I have learned so much from that.*

It is actually one of my favorite books, too. If I had to say which of my books was the hardest and yet the most rewarding to write, it is this one, because figuring out the theoretical piece of it was really hard. But hard thinking led me to figure out something that was not apparent and that was, somehow original in its insight. And you know, it has been exactly 25 years since it was published.

*Yes, that is true! It came out in 1996.*

25th anniversary!

*Wow, do you celebrate it?*

I would love to. Harvard University Press has never done much to promote it. And I think part of the problem with that book is that it was perceived to be a women in French history book, rather than a more general theoretical intervention in feminist studies. It has been under-read and its argument has been under-appreciated in terms of how it could be applied to other circumstances. My book on the veil<sup>8</sup> gets a lot of attention, and that is fine; but I feel that *Only paradoxes to offer* deserves more attention that it has gotten.

*To me, *Only paradoxes to offer* is so relevant because it makes a strong point about the dynamics that are central to emancipation struggles in modernity. The idea of the paradox is really helpful, because it shows how feminists could not avoid referring to gender difference while at the same time claiming inclusion into humanity, which was, of course, a completely androcentric concept. Looking at that dilemma from the point of view of the paradox allows one to question, for example, a simple distinction between difference feminism and equality feminism. To go beyond this seeming oppositional feminist perspective and to explain how it relates to the same paradox, as you do in your book, proved very helpful to me.*

I think the reason that this book is so focused on French history and French women is because after I wrote the gender article, there were accusations against me that claimed that I was no longer a historian. It was said that I was a philosopher, not a true historian—as if theorized history could not count because it was not solely focused on describing empirical materials.

*Was that a good or a bad thing?*

Well, they thought of it as bad, I thought of it as “Oh, if only I were a philosopher.” Ha! But I am not. When I gave my gender paper in my inaugural presentation here at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, colleagues from the Princeton history department came over to

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<sup>7</sup> Joan Scott, *Only paradoxes to offer: French feminists and the rights of man* (1996).

<sup>8</sup> Joan Scott, *The politics of the veil* (2007).

hear me. Lawrence Stone went back to the history department and said, “Well, Joan Scott is not a historian. She is dabbling in philosophy, she does not do history anymore.”

*It was a rough start then?*

Yes. I talk about this in an essay for the issue of the *American Historical Review*, in a forum in 2008 reflecting on the impact of the gender article.<sup>9</sup> And in my contribution, I describe how I gave the talk in Princeton in the fall of 1985. And as I talked, the historians from Princeton folded their arms, leaned farther and farther back in their chairs, as if to get away from me as much as they possibly could. And that was not the only reaction. Among feminist historians the denunciation of theory was sometimes violent, as in a really mean book by Lynn Hunt, Joyce Appleby, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the truth about history*.<sup>10</sup> There was a whole chapter which is a direct attack on me that says things like, “There are 100 steps to get into the archives in Lyon, and while we climb those steps, Joan Scott is sitting at home doing theory that requires no empirical research at all.” So I thought when I started working on *Only paradoxes to offer*, “I am going to show them that I am a historian”—and a historian of France at that! I might do theoretical stuff, but it had to be grounded in the history of those four or five women, and it *had* to be based on archival research. It was the book in which I wanted to prove my credentials as a historian and at the same time, demonstrate the usefulness of an analytic and theoretical approach.

*... and as a philosopher?*

Well, I would not give up on the analysis, but it had to have archival grounding as its basis. If I had been writing a different kind of book, it might have been examples from all over the world, instead of just relentlessly French examples. It might have been a more general argument with lots of little demonstrations and explanations, and that would have made it a more visible book among readers who were not French historians.

*You mentioned that it was hard for you to figure out that book. What did it clarify to you?*

Initially, I wrote an article called “Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: Or, the uses of poststructuralist theory for feminism”<sup>11</sup> in 1988. After having written that article, I had a sense of wanting to do more with deconstructing equality-versus-difference, which was at the heart of so much feminist thinking. In feminist meetings we would argue about whether to take an equality or difference approach. And I would roll my eyes since it seemed to me we needed not to argue about which position was better, but to ask why we were trapped in that opposition. Taking up *Only paradoxes to offer* was meant to answer that question. The hard part was figuring out the paradox and seeing that it was impossible to resolve. What was at issue was

<sup>9</sup> Joan Scott, Unanswered questions (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob (Eds.), *Telling the truth about history* (1989).

<sup>11</sup> Joan Scott, Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: Or, the uses of post-structuralist theory for feminism (1988).

not the inability of feminists to figure out their politics, but the conceptual frame in which they operated, which was liberal, individualist, and republican in France, and which understood the abstract individual to be masculine, even though it was never articulated fully as such. The individual was assumed to be a man, so when women demanded equality, they were rejected on the grounds of their difference from the abstract individual. They could not be abstracted from their sex. Whether they demanded equality on the grounds of sameness or difference, the answer was the same.

Figuring out how that operated was really hard. I had any number of conversations with friends, in which I would say “What is happening here?” And that helped a lot. Some of them were philosophers or literary scholars pushing me to think outside the historian’s box. I wrote a first draft of the book and I knew I had not quite gotten there. My friend Elizabeth Weed at Brown University could always put her finger on the problem. She said, you have not figured this out yet, and she made some crucial suggestions. And I went back and kept working until it seemed right. I say in my acknowledgments to my most recent book, *On the judgment of history*,<sup>12</sup> that it takes a seminar, or a series of seminars, to move a lone scholar to the insights she can have.

*Do you think that the argument you developed in Only paradoxes to offer still works if you look at contemporary politics? What you show in the book is that we cannot resolve the paradox, but we can deal with it in different ways. Did this change in neoliberal times, where for example certain ways of celebrating difference became a part of hegemonic politics while structural inequality is still enforced and perpetuated? Does that mean that the paradox has not disappeared—but do we need to analyze it differently?*

I think that what you say is true—that the paradox continues now in a somewhat different frame. The emergence of the “happy diversity” of neoliberalism is often based on an essentialist and singular notion of identity. Against intersectionality, the argument is, “They are women, they are African Americans, they are Latinos, they are Lesbians”—as if those were singular identities that then had to be dealt with or addressed in this happy diverse family. The problem is that identity is fixed when we know it is not and also that the ways in which power creates difference are ignored. It is as if the multiplicity of identities has nothing to do with hierarchy or relations of power.

Also, the dilemma about defining the meaning of sexual difference remains. Probably in the 1990s, even in the early 2000s, there was a loosening up of all of this. There was a more general consensus that women ought to have access to a whole range of things that they did not have before. That women should be equal to men in terms of access to medical school, or to legal professions or other jobs, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, the reality has been a class divide in which middle-class women get increased access because they can hire working-class, poor, immigrant women to provide care for them and their families. The care industry has grown up to facilitate that; care is synonymous with certain women’s work—so the divide of sexual difference in employment remains at least at some levels of the workforce.

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12 Joan Scott, *On the judgment of history* (2020).



In addition, changes in the understanding of the relationship between the body, biology, and gender have led to a huge backlash. That is what we are living with now, in a really dramatic form, especially in countries with authoritarian leaders. We have just escaped one here, in the form of Donald Trump. The backlash is being led in most places by the Catholic Church, Evangelical Christians, and leaders like Bolsonaro in Brazil, Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, and the current government in Poland. Those leaders are attached to a so-called traditional notion of gender and they are actually outlawing the teaching of gender, race, colonialism—all studies critical of the histories and politics of their nations. So, while there have been enormous advances, and even what might seem to be a consensus about women's place in societies, the backlash makes it apparent that the fight is not over. The adherence of certain groups to so-called traditional gender roles has not gone away and serves nefarious political purposes.

*It makes sense to me that you point out the return of seemingly traditional understandings of gender. However, they may look traditional but they are embedded in the current neoliberal setting, which forces us to come up with an entirely new analytical approach, right?*

Yes and no. I think that it is no accident that authoritarian leaders want to assert their domination over women in traditional patriarchal ways. We need to think psychoanalytically about how the promise to provide security appeals to the power of strong men to protect women and children. And also about how any change in women's status threatens that power.

The emergence of the trans movement also threatens that power because it extends or maybe intensifies the challenge to traditional gender categories. Transgender people are a tiny proportion of their countries' populations. And yet in the US, the trans issue is a lightning rod for Republicans in some states. They are denying medical treatment to trans people. They are banning trans people from participating in sports. A trans friend of mine points out that gender theory teaches us that we all fail to fulfill the idealized norms of sexual difference; they argue that trans is one form of that failure, but points it up in a more dramatic way. For right-wing politicians, then, the attack on trans is also an attack on feminist and queer critics of heteronormativity. It is a way of protecting family, race, and nation from the changes in how we understand gender that have already occurred.

*Is the paradox helpful to understand these developments? One of the questions one might have after reading your book is the question about the applicability of the paradox: Does it work in reference to women only, or does it also work in reference to other struggles?*

I think you have to look at what was being asked. I do not think going in with the paradox is like "Ha! Here's the paradox, here's the paradox!" The paradox I identified had to do with a specific historical context: the contradiction at the center of French republican liberal individualism that said people could be abstracted from their social, economic, religious, and political contexts for the purposes of citizenship; but that men, but not women, could be abstracted from their sex. It premised equality on sameness with the abstract male individual, but made abstraction sex-related! So, when women insisted on equality in the name of either



their sameness or their difference, they were ruled out of citizenship on the grounds that they could not be abstracted from their sex. They were, in the language of the 19th century, “the sex.”

It is not the question of abstraction and difference that trans raises, but the binary at the heart of traditional notions of gender. Trans has really blown apart the ability to think gender solely in binary terms; although I think the binary remains as that against which new ways of thinking are emerging. Maybe the contradiction being exposed by trans has to do with its challenge to the idea that any gender assignment is fixed or fixable, its demonstration that—as I said earlier—psychoanalysis teaches us that we all fail to fulfill the imagined wholeness of any gender ideal. If that is the case, we are not dealing with an unresolvable paradox, but with the need to rethink what any assignment of gender identity means. It is an anti-essentialist position, not a biologically grounded one.

*Yes. I think what makes people crazy is not to be able to separate bodies neatly into two categories. Even though that has never fully worked. Creating two and only two categories has always been a violent and in some way artificial act, and I think the reason why some people react so aggressively is not because trans is something particularly new, but that it points out the deficiency of the binary system. That reminds me of one of my favorite quotes from your gender article, namely that “man and woman are at once empty and overflowing categories” (p. 1074). And I am wondering, looking at that phrase from the discussions we have just brought up around trans lives, trans studies, and trans activism, whether or not this sentence has gathered different meanings from when you wrote it down in the mid-1980s.*

Yes and no. Partly because I like that sentence. And I can still remember writing it. Sometimes when you write, you think “Ah, that is how to say it!” and that sentence is one of those. I remember how I felt when I wrote it; I was excited. But my answer is yes and no. Because of course, the deconstruction of those categories means that we have not come up with a new terminology. But there is a search for other ways of understanding who is outside of those two categories. That they are overflowing categories means the overflow is going to undermine them. And that has and has not happened. I do not know if it will fully happen. I do find it hard to think of the category as multiple in their articulation, in their embodiment. And I find it really hard to get rid of them entirely. Because how we have grown up to see the world in a certain way. It might be interesting not to ask about paradoxes, but to say “What does it mean to reconceive the world of gender identity, as we have grown up, and as we have known it?” And that would be beyond cheering on the trans. It would be about saying okay, the existence of trans as well as the transformation of the roles attributed to and available to women and men are now open. What does that mean?! These politicians who are saying our whole world is going to fall apart if this happens are right. Their world *is* going to fall apart, and our world too. What does it mean to say, beyond the fact that girls and boys have equal access to education, or sports, that you are not going to think in terms of girls and boys anymore, or men and women? I do not know! I do not think we have come up with the answer, but that is not to say we are not exploring what the answers might be.

*One problem of separating sex and gender, is, of course, how one thinks about their inseparability and about the ways in which gender and sex cannot be disentangled.*

Yes, I think that they are always intertwined. The question is how you see the causality operating. Certainly Judith Butler is the one who says that it is not sex which comes first, it is gender that comes first. Jean Laplanche says it even more strongly in a later essay.<sup>13</sup> He says that gender is the attribution of meaning to a sexed body. They are always tied up together. The question is the causality that you want to assume.

*But was it not the case that gender helped feminists to break free from certain things?*

The notion was that gender let us break free from the causality of the sexed body. Before, you were a woman, or you were a man because of what your body was. "Anatomy was destiny." What "gender" allowed us to do was not break free from the relationship of sex to gender, but to say that sex does not determine gender. Social attributions of meaning are what determined sex. And so the problem of the relationship of the two has always been there. The question is what causes what, and how you want to think the causal relationship. And what gender allowed us to do in the 70s was to detach the causality from sexed bodies. Not to say that there was no relationship between them.

*Or to describe different causalities in different times, and how they might reappear? Like: "Look, there are people who in different times already tried to ..."*

... change the relationship. But the crucial thing was that the *body* was not the primary determinant of what was thought to be the natural roles or nature. Nature was not the determinant, it was nature vs. culture. There was the important book by the anthropologists Louise Lamphere and Michelle Rosaldo, *Woman, culture, and society*,<sup>14</sup> arguing that it was not nature, it was culture that determined the role of women and men. What you were allowed to do with the body was a social decision, rather than a biological imperative. And that is where the question of reproduction gets complicated. Whether you think of reproduction as a natural role for women, or a culturally attributed one, women's bodies are the only ones, so far, that can produce children. So, the status of bodies in thinking about gender is always complicated. You cannot entirely do away with bodies. There is some sort of materiality there that *has* to get addressed.

*Let me raise another question at this point, namely the feminist context you lived in as a influential feminist scholar. You mentioned that there were people around you that helped you think through it, and I think it is really important to point out how thinking is not something that we just do by ourselves. There are contexts and co-thinkers, and I am really interested in hearing more about the kind of collectivities you were in that helped to create your work.*

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13 Jean Laplanche, *Gender, sex and the sexual* (2011).

14 Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Eds.), *Woman, culture, and society* (1974).

I guess the first feminist collective I was in was in Chicago. My then-husband was teaching at the University of Chicago, and I was at the University of Illinois Chicago and then at Northwestern University. We had a feminist reading group that met once a month. We read everything that was coming out—it was the early 1970s. Shulamith Firestone was the dramatic text.<sup>15</sup> I remember reading and thinking “Oh God! What does this mean?!” I had two young children at the time, and it was like, giving up on reproduction? How was that possible?

*It was disturbing to you in this specific situation?*

Well, I think it was disturbing to all of us. But the fact that we could discuss it and argue about it was important—collectively we did better than any of us would have done individually. We also read lots of other things. There was a xeroxed women’s history reading list from Natalie Davis and Jill Conway, who were teaching then at the University of Toronto. We had no internet. We would mail these purple copies of everything to each other to set up our own reading lists. It was like “samizdat”—the Russian underground literature. I remember that I was teaching at University of Illinois Chicago, and I assigned something that Natalie Davis had on her reading list. It was a pornographic satire about women, and it was *really* shocking. I read it the night before the class. And I thought: “Oh my God, what am I going to do?” It was fine, I said to them it was satire and we talked about what it was satirizing, powerful women, as I remember, and it went well. This reading group met every week for a number of years. As long as I was in Chicago I was in that group.

*Who was part of the group?*

There were probably 10 or 12 of us, from different departments and from different universities in the area. They all became fairly prominent feminist scholars in some form or another. The only people I actually remember are me and Judith Kegan Gardiner, a feminist literary scholar. She was in the English department, and I was in the history department at the University of Illinois Chicago. We were doing institutional politics at the same time. We pushed and pushed and pushed. A women’s studies program came out of that effort and a daycare center as well.

*Was that your introduction to feminism?*

Yes.

*You had not been in touch with feminism from childhood on ...*

No, absolutely not. The reading group was my introduction to feminism. It was Judith Gardiner who was the propelling force of the group. And I read widely and began to incorporate it into my teaching. At the same time, I was working with Louise Tilly on what became our book *Women, work, and family*.<sup>16</sup> Also, I was involved with other women members of the American

15 Shulamith Firestone, *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution* (1970).

16 Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, work, and family* (1978).

Historical Association, to draw attention to the status of women in the historical profession, and to women's history as a legitimate field of inquiry. All of that eventually culminated in my writing the 1986 article.

*Did you have contact with Gerda Lerner at the time?*

Yes, in the American Historical Association, I had direct contact with her. We conspired together on professional matters and we pushed for a boycott by the AHA of states that had not ratified the ERA. The ERA, Equal Rights Amendment, was on the books in a number of states as a proposed amendment to the US constitution. In order for an amendment to the constitution to be enacted, it had to be ratified by each state. The progress was slow and disappointing. Feminists in the various professional associations were pushing for a boycott of non-ratifying states. The idea was that we would not hold our annual conferences in these states. In some cases we won, in other cases we did not. At that point, it was around 1980, I was chair of the women's committee of the American Historical Association. Gerda was one of the people working with us to convince the leadership to boycott. For me, political activism and intellectual activity came together in these years. Those were amazing years.

*How many were you?*

It was a small group, not tiny though. Maybe 20 or 30, and Gerda Lerner was certainly one of them, she was fiery in her approach to this kind of stuff. Kathryn Kish Sklar was part of that group as well. I was immersed in this work. The activism of feminists was intense and impressive, even when the numbers were relatively small. In 1974, I went to teach at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. There, I was part of a small group, four or five of us, who organized a seminar across the disciplines, to talk about introducing women's studies into the curriculum. It took us three or four years to do it, but we did it. We created the women's studies program there. And at the same time we were arguing for attention to hiring women, promoting women, to women's salaries being equal to men's.

*It is really interesting how you have combined the introduction and advancement of women's studies and the struggle for equality.*

Yes, and the argument was that the politics required a certain kind of knowledge production. That we had to produce knowledge as sociologists, or anthropologists, or historians, even as we were arguing for a greater presence of women on the faculty.

*And how was the students' response regarding the introduction of women's studies?*

Oh, the students then were pushing us. These days, we are pushing the students. The students were the activists then, and we would go into meetings with deans and say, you know, these students are going to be protesting all over the place. If you give us what we are asking for, we can satisfy their demands, and you will not have riots, or sit-ins or whatever else was threatened.

*You could really make use of their activism?*

Yes. Students would get up in class and say they did not want any more history, they wanted “her-story.” At North Carolina, I was very much involved in setting up women’s studies, and in getting an ombudsman appointed for women’s issues. There were a lot of protests about sexual harassment in 1975, 76, 77, and we went to see the chancellor, who was this old Southern guy—religious, probably Baptist. We went to see him, four of us, and we said that there was a problem in the sciences, that the laboratory assistants were often sexually harassed by the professor in charge of the lab. They were invited to go to conferences, and then all kinds of sexual propositions followed. We said that a committee needed to be set up, to deal with this issue. He said “Well, we do not need a committee,” like the paternalist leader he was, he said “I’m here, and they can come and see me. These things happen between women and men every day, 24 hours a day, six days a week.” We all stopped, and thought “Never on Sunday.” But arguing that a committee needed to be set up, instead of this chancellor who was overseeing everything, was a *huge* argument. We won, and we did get a committee. There was, at least in the US, a moment of attention to affirmative action, it was the first wave of the second wave of feminism. And so there was attention being paid to these programs at this level at that time.

When I arrived in 1980 at Brown University, there was similar activism. But there was already a preexisting feminist reading group. They were the “theory-heads,” the literary, philosophical, psychoanalytic feminists.

*Who were they?*

Naomi Schor, Kaja Silverman, Elizabeth Weed, Ellen Rooney, Mary Anne Doane, Anne Fausto-Sterling. It was an amazing group. We met, I think, once a week or once every other week. That is where I read *Les mots et les choses* by Michel Foucault,<sup>17</sup> that was my moment of epistemological crisis. And I remember how I said in the group, “But, you know, what is he telling us? What is this about, history?” And Naomi Schor said: “The whole book is about history, Joan!”

*And what was it that made your perspective crumble in this moment?*

My view of history changed—I understood it as having a history of its own; that rather than thinking in terms of linear continuity, you had to think in terms of discontinuity. That you had to think genealogically, that there were large frames within which smaller events and developments and changes took place.

*And that power plays the role it does?*

And that relations of power are everywhere. Not just in the obvious places, in the state or in the law. But in institutions of every kind. That was hugely important for me. And there too, at Brown, it was both political and intellectual. There was no women’s studies program,

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17 Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (1966).

although the university had just settled a sex discrimination suit brought by the anthropologist Louise Lamphere. That opened the way for renewed attention to women on the faculty and in the curriculum. Elizabeth Weed and I applied for grants and when we got them, women's studies was approved. The outside recognition and the money made the difference. And we set up the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women—still my proudest institutional achievement.

*How did that come about?*

The same way. It was connected to getting women's studies approved and getting the Pembroke Center approved. Pembroke had been a women's college at Brown University from the 1890s until 1969–70. Then, when many men's colleges—Yale, Princeton, other places—integrated women into their student bodies, Brown integrated Pembroke. And many of the women who were in those early classes were furious that they lost their identity. There was a generational split. The young women who entered the coed institution wanted nothing to do with Pembroke; the women who had graduated years before wanted to preserve the memory and the name of their college. I thought history could provide a solution. I said that we were creating a center that we were going to name Pembroke, and that it was the 20th-century incarnation of what the college had been. It reminded us of that history, and it was attentive to questions about women. We had undergraduates interview some of those old Pembrokers to tell us their stories, we set up an oral history project. And we won back a number of those women, won back their donations as well. The creation of the Pembroke Center was the creation of the memory of the women's college of Brown University, re-embodied in a center that would look at feminist issues and feminist theory in new ways. And it worked!

*And how could you stabilize the finances for the center?*

We formed a group of associates of former Pembrokers who donated money. Some of them large sums. It is an ongoing fundraising operation that has been highly successful in creating a permanent endowment for the center. That is something that in a private university is vital to the ongoing existence of such a program.

*Up to this day, it is possible to raise money for the center?*

They just raised another million dollars I think. There is now an endowment that will keep the center going for many long years. And it is one of the few, if not the only, women's studies programs or centers that is a theoretically driven feminist studies program. Most of the others are more empirically grounded.

*At the Pembroke Center, you were a mentor and a host for many feminist scholars. Can you tell me a bit about that aspect of your work?*

I was more a host than a mentor since I learned so much from these fellows. These were my years of feminist theory training! The Pembroke Center still has three postdoctoral fellows.

I think we had four at the beginning; there are three now. And those are endowed positions now. Faculty of all ranks, visiting postdocs, graduate students, and even some undergraduates who would be writing an honors thesis in relation to whatever the theme was of the center, meet there.

*And you met monthly?*

Once a week. The seminar still meets once a week.

*Did you have a sense of that what you were doing was really big at the time? All these crucial feminists meeting at Pembroke and exchanging their ideas ...*

We were really excited, yes. There were real possibilities for these things to happen. The money we got to found the Pembroke Center was from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which was, in those years, open to our research, and from the Ford Foundation. We are talking about the years of academic expansion and the openness to what we would now call diversity, to women's studies programs, to African American studies programs. There were these programs that, when they received outside funding, were willingly set up by university administrators. At the Ford Foundation there was an economist named Mariam Chamberlain, who was in charge of educational programs. She was also a feminist. And she funded at least a dozen women's studies programs across the US. We were one of them.

*Wow. That was a different time.*

Yes. The Ford-funded programs established a coordinating committee for all centers that met annually. The possibilities were really enormous and the money was there. We were not in a time of austerity. We had to compete for the money, to justify what it was that we were doing intellectually. We called our Brown program "cultural constructions of the female," arguing that what we would call gender was the way of understanding of how women and men got to be placed in asymmetrical relationships, how that changed, and what the circumstances and context were within which it happened. Cultural constructions of the female was our first and very successful set of grants.

*When you think back to the intellectual space that emerged at the time, was it very controversial among you, did you push each other in regard to your positions, or was it more like thinking along similar lines?*

A little of both. In the Pembroke Center, we were looking for ways to enhance the approaches that we had. They were poststructuralist, for the most part: Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Freud, Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva, we read all of that. The point was to refine our theoretical approaches, and we would argue a lot about that. It was there that I felt like I found a home, which I did not have among historians. The historians were the ones who were angry at me; this group was different. I was probably the most resistant person in the group. I would say things like "Well, how is that historical? Where is the empirical basis for this?" I was coming to it as



somebody who was interested in interpreting things but who had never had the exposure to the kinds of theoretical and philosophical issues that the group did. So, for me, it was an amazing learning experience.

*And Anne Fausto-Sterling, the feminist biologist, was part of the group as well?*

Yes. In interesting ways as a biologist, she was willing to listen to a lot of theoretical stuff. Her work shows how totally transformative the exposure to the theory could be. In some ways, she was the most transformed of all of us by what went on in the Pembroke seminar.

My Brown years were my most formative intellectual years, and the Pembroke Center was the place where all of that happened. And *that* was what enabled me to write the gender article. I think of the gender article as the culmination of my education at Brown University. I am still very attached to the Pembroke Center. It is my intellectual home in a way that no place else has been. I never would have left Brown except that the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton was an opportunity that you cannot say no to. A fully funded life of research and thinking and the possibility of bringing people to the seminar for a year, that makes all the difference for one's field, not only for one's individual research.

*You told me how much you had learned at Brown about feminist theory and new ways of looking at history. I would still like to know more about your role as a mentor though. I know that at the Pembroke Center you were an important teacher for many younger feminists, as you were later at the Institute.*

I always saw my teaching as being really important to what I did. And so my relationship with my students, particularly with graduate students, was central to my work. I thought of it as not just supervising the writing of a thesis, but as preparing them, women and men, to be feminist scholars and to take care of students and colleagues, to be both active institutionally and intellectually. And those two things always mattered to me, both as an example but also as something I supported and encouraged in the graduate students that I worked with. The more powerful position of what you are calling mentorship came with my appointment to the Institute for Advanced Study. Because being at the Institute gives you a certain international prestigious position. I could support people with more authority than I did when I was at Brown. And I could support feminists more generally in the scholarly world.

One perfect example of this happened shortly after I arrived. One day, I got a phone call from Bernard Bailyn, who was a professor at Harvard. He had been the president of the American Historical Association when I was the head of the women's committee, and that was one way I had gotten to know him. I answered the phone and he said, "Joan! This is Bud Bailyn," and I said something like "How are you Bud?" He said, "I'm calling because we have an applicant to the Society of Fellows at Harvard, and she wants to write a history of lesbianism." And then came the best line of the whole conversation: He said, "I'm calling you to see what you think of this. It's not a field I read in and I assume it is a field you know." I struggled to control my reaction because all I could think was: "Gay history has become a field!—a field that wasn't exactly my own, but that I did know something about, certainly more than he did."

My Institute for Advanced Study position made me an authority from whom he could get advice about whether this woman's project was legitimate or not. He said, "Aren't there lots of histories of lesbians?" And I said: "Well, the way this woman is going to write it will be different, she is a very imaginative and committed scholar" and so on and so forth. But the point is, he never would have called me if I had been at Brown. Suddenly, I had become an authority, with a legitimacy to comment on scholarship that he now deemed a field! It was one of those moments when you realize that a certain kind of institutional power is yours to use in ways that can or cannot be helpful to people. Coming to the Institute really made a difference in that way. And it also meant that I could help select people for a year with fellowships in the School of Social Science, and I could help select and argue for people who looked like they were doing really interesting and important work. That was my Judith Butler story.

*Help me out, what was your Judith Butler story?*

I came to the Institute in 1985. And we all took turns having a theme for a seminar for the members. I do not remember what the themes were when I came. But in 1987–88, my theme was gender, and lots of people applied. Judith was a young scholar, I think she was teaching at American University in Washington, DC. She applied and I had never heard of her. I remember looking at the application and I asked Naomi Schor, who was one of the Brown feminist reading group, "Do you know anything about her. Who is this Judith person?" And she said, "She is a rising star." So we accepted her and she came to the Institute, where she wrote *Gender trouble*. She was very smart, Naomi was right, and she was *terrific* to engage and argue with. There were a lot of other feminists who came in that gender year too, but she has certainly become the most influential.

*When you listened to Judith Butler talking about her project, did you have a sense that she was really onto something that was going to change the whole field of gender studies?*

No, I think that I felt that she was somebody really smart that one had to listen to. I read maybe a chapter or two of *Gender trouble* while she was writing it here. I think more it was the person. It was that this was an intelligence that was worth listening to and engaging with. I do not think I had any idea that her star would rise as fast as it did and remain there in the constellation of important stars, large stars, bright stars. But I think she would also say that her year at the Institute was important, because it gave her a way of figuring out what she wanted to be doing. It let her leave her job at American University; she went to Johns Hopkins from there. And so it was a very consequential year for her, too.

*I fully understand how you say you got this job, which gave you this power, and you wanted to make use of it, especially for feminists who are upcoming. This raises the question of how you navigated your feminist ethics as a mentor and supervisor. Because on the one hand, you are in these institutions, and they are hierarchical, you are going to grade people's dissertations, there are all these aspects of power within institutions that have nationalist, colonial, and patriarchal histories. So you are part of that. And on the other hand, you have these feminist ideas of*

*what working with people and supporting people means. Was that ever a tension you were struggling with?*

No, it was not a tension at all. It gave a critical edge to all my work; it inspired my work. You have to think about the timing of this. At Brown, in 1980–85, it was a matter of creating a subversive space within the university. In 1980 that was okay to do. That was the moment of founding women’s studies programs all over the country. And so, yes, the institutions we were up against were hierarchical and misogynist and male-dominated, but it was possible to create spaces within which feminist work could be legitimized. Critical work needs something to be opposed to, and those structures of power, those old ways of producing knowledge, were what we were contesting. For a while, the same was true at the Institute. I think I always took for granted the fact that we were operating as political dissidents in institutions that were not ideal institutions. But that was part of the fun. It was about being able to figure out how to make a difference within the institutional settings that we were not exactly open to what we wanted to achieve. And in both cases—at Brown and at the Institute—I never felt that I was up against really punitive authorities. It was not like we were going to get punished for the support we were giving to feminist scholarship either at Brown or at the Institute. There was a sense of real possibility, of creating things that some people might look down upon, some people might object to, but there was not any kind of hard power lined up against us. That was true in the 1980s, at least in the United States, when the founding of women’s studies programs all over the country took place. That was the moment—mid-70s, but the 80s particularly—of possibility for feminist programs.

*There was a certain space that opened up and allowed different and new relationships within the university?*

The universities wanted a certain kind of diversity, and women’s studies would be part of that diversity, as well as African American studies. It was in part a response to political demands by students for these programs. But it was also a commitment to opening things up, being more diverse, to entertaining new possibilities for academic work. I think that has been closing down in this century.

*It did change quite a bit, right?*

Yes, but the programs got set up and they are still there. They are under assault now in a way they were not before, because budgets are being cut and money withheld but, at least in the United States, they are still an institutional presence that has to be reckoned with.

*My next question has to do with crucial changes as well, but on the level of theory. I am interested in the way in which you keep reflecting on what gender as a concept can or cannot do. And on the history of gender as a rather unknown concept, which it was when you and others took it up in the 1970s and 80s, to gender as a well-known term that was heavily used in*

*the context of the UN for example. In the 1999 version of Gender and the politics of history,<sup>18</sup> you wrote that “I find myself using gender less and less in my work, talking instead about differences between the sexes and about sex as historically variable concept” (p. xii). What is implied here is that gender as a concept has lost the ability to open things up, and make them think-able in new or helpful ways. Can you say something about the shifts that happened between the introduction of gender into feminist thinking and the time when everybody seemed to have taken it up, in the mid-1990s?*

What I felt when I wrote that preface was that people thought they knew what gender meant. And what it meant was the differences between women and men. It was not a question anymore. It was not a *radical* way of arguing that sexed bodies were not the explanation for the gender differences that one could see in societies in different historical moments. It did not have the radical potential that it had when we first started using it. It had become a word referring to a cultural concept attributed to sexed bodies, and not itself a reflection of those bodies. That was a good thing, but there was still the belief that it stood for the binary of sexual difference, rather than an interrogation of how that binary was used. It was not doing the work of critical engagement that it had done in the beginning.

But then, in the last 10 years or so, it has yet again taken another turn with an attack on “gender” by authoritarian governments and right-wing political groups. Among the banners unfurled by opponents of gay marriage in France was one of my favorites: “Non à la théorie du genre.”<sup>19</sup> In what place other than France would you have a political movement against a theory!

So, it seems to me that, partly because of the backlash against the radical use of the notion of gender, namely that gender does not need to correspond to biology and that biology does not determine the attributions of gender to people, gender has become once again something to be defended, something to be talked about, something that is of *critical* use. It is largely because the right has resurrected gender as an enemy that we are able to defend it in the critical terms that it was meant to be used in the first place.

*So, in a weird way, the right has understood at least part of the message that gender meant to convey?*

Absolutely.

*Namely that the causal relations between biology and society that they claim are immutable are, indeed, subject to change. And I think that is what they are fighting against.*

Yes, and they were fighting against it back when the term was first used. But it has now become an even more dramatic focus for the right. You think to yourself “Why does somebody like Viktor Orbán in Hungary need to outlaw gender studies to hold onto his power?”

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18 Joan Scott, *Gender and the politics of history* (1999).

19 English translation: “No to the theory of gender.”

*What do you think is the potential, or maybe the pitfalls, of the ways in which gender has to be defended today as opposed to when it was an unknown term?*

That is a really good question. I think the pitfalls are that you have to reply in a simple way to their accusations. When they say, “This is unnatural,” “This is against God,” “Gender refers to the biology at birth of women and men,” our reply has to be “No, it does not. It is a political or social or cultural set of attributions made about sexed bodies.” That is the fairly simple reply—just defending the notion of what we called the cultural constructions of gender in the 80s. Insisting that these are cultural attributes, not natural or God-given ones. Theoretically, we have gone beyond that, but it is harder to come up with a popularizable definition of the theory. The one that I am most taken by is the one that says that *gender comes before sex*. That is, that gender is the attribution to sexed bodies of the justification for the cultural distinctions that are being made. Sex is the question: What is the meaning of these bodies? There is no good answer to that, psychoanalytically or otherwise. It is fascinating to think about the fantasies that kids have about what it does and does not mean to have this body, this sexed body. And trans has raised a whole other set of issues. What is it that leads someone who has been thought of as male or masculine all of their life to declare that there is a kind of femininity in them that they want to be realized? Not as gay, but as trans? The complexity of refusing the binary is a new way of rethinking gender identity in relation to a sexed body. That relationship is even more *split* than we ever imagined theoretically.

*And work like Butler’s has helped putting these questions on the table ...*

Absolutely. So, there is a really challenging set of theoretical questions on the table in relation to what has been established as gender study. Being able to think that while the whole project is under attack is very difficult. We can show historically that there were different notions of what it meant to be male or female, in different historical periods, in different cultures of the world, and so on and so forth. But then, the question of how to think some of these new challenges like the trans phenomenon is very hard to pursue while you are fighting the backlash.

*It comes together in the sense that gender was always a way to say that there was no simple answer to questions around the sexed body. In your later writings, and with the help of psychoanalysis, you try to keep the question of gender open in the sense of talking about a sexualized difference that we cannot do away with, at least not in this time and place, and that structures the way we feel and think. But it is not something that we can answer or resolve once and for all.*

Yes, it is always a set of questions, attempts to explain what is ultimately not explainable. Which is what this difference of sex means. But what is interesting about the trans phenomenon is that it complicates that set of questions. Because the set of questions was “How do men and women understand their place in this spectrum of possibility that defines femininity or masculinity?” But then, what happens when trans comes into the picture, and complicates that binary ... even if the binary distinction is not really binary but says that there is a spectrum of possibility?

*That is the question. Is the binary distinction eroded, or even overcome? Or is it another way of dealing with the binary?*

I think it calls the binary into question in ways that I do not understand.

*You do not understand?*

I do not understand where that comes from. You know, I think it is one thing to say: "This is the spectrum of possibility for femininity." Because you can have everything from butch to femme to lipstick lesbians. But it was always understood as the range of possibility of being a woman. But what happens when you do not think of yourself as within the framework of either woman- or manhood? What happens when you are saying "Yes, I might be biologically male, but there's a kind of feminine identity I want to claim." Where is that coming from? How do we understand how that gets produced?

*I would like to bring in the topic of reproduction here because in regard to reproduction, trans perspectives challenge the premises within gender studies and beyond. We need to figure out what happens when there are men or nonbinary people who are pregnant, give birth, and breastfeed. When I was a young feminist scholar, it seemed to be clear that when you give birth to a child, you could be a butch or a dyke, whatever, but ...*

... but you are a woman.

*But you are a woman, yes. And this has changed. I find this very interesting and challenging. It brings up the question of what reproduction has to do with gender in novel ways. As a question that we never got rid of, and that gets posed differently by trans bodies, trans lives, and trans families today.*

Absolutely.

*Would you say that your own way of thinking about gender has shifted in the past years and in the context of these discussions?*

Yes and no. Yes, because new questions require new answers; no, because what we said before, if gender is always a question, then it is not tied to any set relationship. It means that in the face of new developments, you ask, "What is going on here? How do we understand these radical objections to binary thinking about gender? Are there really alternatives to identifying newborns as boys or girls? What are the psychic effects of these alternatives?"

*One other really important discussion within gender studies is intersectionality. The way in which gender is always already related to other social differences, which are part of the way in which power is organized in society. And this is related to the decolonization of knowledge, and to antiracist approaches to research. How do you see these discussions?*

Intersectionality is an important theoretical concept. But I also think that it is overused, and not every situation, not every feminist movement, is also about race. There are moments when the identity of woman is critical to a certain form of political mobilization. And race may or may not play into it. Certainly, in the white feminist movements of the 1970s, the exclusion of black women and black experience was crucial, just as the exclusion of lesbian experience was crucial. That is a very specific set of issues that needs an analysis of intersectionality. But I do not think that every analysis that one wants to do needs to be intersectional. That *it needs* to say: Where is race, where is colonialism, where is ... ? Because I do not think those things always come into play in the same way. Again, there have to be questions that are asked rather than categories imposed. And intersectionality too often wants to just impose the categories of race, class, and gender onto a particular analysis, when it may or may not be useful to do that. You have to ask the questions about whether these things are coming together. But they do not always, and they are not always useful. I just find the kind of knee-jerk intersectionality to be the same problem that knee-jerk gender was. Here are men and women, here is gender. Or: Here is race, where is gender? And sometimes the answer is, gender is not useful for my analyzing this particular set of issues. Race is more salient. And I do not need to have all of them, race, class, and gender, to do the racial implications of the analysis that I want to make. For a really good discussion of the uses of the analytic of intersectionality, I recommend the little book by Eléonore Lépinard and Sarah Mazouz, *Pour l'intersectionnalité*.<sup>20</sup>

My last book, *On the judgment of history*,<sup>21</sup> is largely about race and the way race figures in certain historical moments. There is no gender in it. That may be my shortcoming, but I also think the problem I was interested in was not a problem in which gender was useful for me to be thinking about. Race was clearly the compelling way of thinking about nationalism, ethnonationalism, and national identity. And yes, there were certain ways in which you could look at gender, but neither gender nor class was compelling to think about the problem that I set for myself to think about there. And I think that is okay. But more generally, intersectionality is an important reminder that we need to take those things into account, even if only to decide that the other categories are not useful for the work we want to do.

*Maybe intersectionality is similar to gender in the sense of working especially well as a question. When I am thinking about gender, intersectionality helps me to ask myself what I really mean. What kind of gender am I talking about? Am I talking about white women in my context, and could it be that I did not realize this because it is the way I am used to referring to the world?*

I agree. One of the things that Black Studies has taught us is that that sort of white bias in a lot of the work we have done needs to be recognized and identified as such. At the same time, everything that we do may not in fact have a component of race in it that is useful for thinking the problem that we are interested in thinking. When I did a paper on the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier, I got some questions about slavery. But my interest in Fourier is not in whether or not he took up slavery. It is rather in how and whether he can unthink sexual difference, and how he tries to find an alternative to the reproductive mandate at the heart of

20 Eléonore Lépinard and Sarah Mazouz, *Pour l'intersectionnalité* (2021).

21 Joan Scott, *On the judgment of history* (2020).



marriage. In my reading of his work and my attempt to come to terms with it, there was not a racial component that would have helped. He did not say: “You know, these black people have a different way of doing sex.” He did say that the people in the East—the Tahitians, the Bengalis—have a kind of polyamorous promiscuity that proves that sexual desire need have nothing to do with reproduction. I take that into account, but it is not central to the way Fourier tries to find alternatives to the repressive institution of marriage. Intersectionality is a reminder that you need to attend to these things, even though you may decide that they are not central to the questions you want to answer.

*Or it might point to paths that you do not follow at this moment . . . . Using Tahitians, Bengalis, or other racialized people providing us with fantasies of how we could live sexually differently has a long history from Rousseau to the present. You could write this history and it could be a colonial history. But that is not what you wanted to do this time, when you took up Fourier’s work. That is how I understand it: You see these relations, point them out, but then you are also saying: “I am following a different set of questions right now.” At this point of our conversation, I would like to refer to another important book that deals with the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, religion, colonialism, and the nation: The politics of the veil.<sup>22</sup> What made you write this book?*

I had been invited to give a series of lectures at Princeton University. My topic was French universalism. For the first lecture I looked at feminist challenges to universalism, a spin-off of my *Only paradoxes to offer* book. For the second, I chose the movement for parity, “le mouvement pour la parité”, a late 20th-century attempt to increase the numbers of women in political office. I needed a third topic and this was 2003—the moment of the huge debates about a law forbidding wearing Islamic headscarves in French public schools. So I thought that was a perfect topic for the general set of questions I was addressing—particularly the way in which secularism, *laïcité*, was being used to exclude practicing Muslims from many aspects of French life, not only schools. At the end of the third lecture, an editor from Princeton University Press approached me and invited me to do a book on the veil controversy. So I did.

*With whom were you in conversation when you wrote that book, who helped you to figure out this really important and foundational critique of laïcité and secularism?*

I was in conversation first with two sides of a French audience: those who defended the law as a requirement for membership in the French nation and those who were critical of its exclusionary impact. I also wanted an American readership to think critically about French racism as it was being revealed in these debates—but as it was also being denied as such. I thought that an American perspective on race and racism would be useful for thinking the French case. Not because the French case was exactly the same as ours, but because we in the US are more analytically sensitive to what counts as racism than the French are—still are. When the translation of my veil book was published 10 years later, I wrote a preface in which I said things had gotten much worse than in 2003–04, when I began my study. But still many

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22 Joan Scott, *The politics of the veil* (2007).

reviews accused me of not understanding the principles of French republicanism, foremost among them *laïcité*. One particularly nasty set of reviews accused me of not understanding the French language. What struck me about all of these attacks was that I had not invented the criticism of what came to be called Islamophobia. There were plenty of French scholars, intellectuals, political figures who agreed with me and whom I cited to make my case. So it was not a matter of some outside US feminist imposing her views, but of a US feminist agreeing with a significant body of French people—a minority to be sure, but a vocal and courageous minority, among them many Muslims.

*There is a question I still have for you—going back to your understanding of gender as an open question: Even though sexual difference cannot be pinned down, is it in any way related to reproduction? I mean, it is definitely a difference that has to do with the body. It is an embodied difference at some point. But does sexual difference have some intrinsic relation to the question of reproduction? And if so, would not that be really problematic?*

Originally, for sure. In the 18th and the 19th century—this is in my book *Sex and secularism*<sup>23</sup>—the argument really is how the narrowing of the notion of sexual activity to reproductive activity, the instrumentalizing of sex for reproduction, the reproduction of the family, the race, the nation, is a very powerful thing. This happens in the 19th and into the 20th century. I think that this is being taken apart now. You can have same-sex parents of children, surrogate maternity ... One of the things that the authoritarian regimes are refusing is the lifting of the reproductive mandate from sexual activity. The reason for the insistence on the natural or God-given difference between women and men has everything to do with the reproductive mandate for the nation. Orbán or one of his ministers says it at some point: “I want my daughters to be producing grandchildren for me, future Hungarian citizens.”

*His nationalism is horrible. And apart from that, he does not realize that lesbians are producing grandchildren as well.*

It is amazing, I know. You could say that there has been no stop in the production of children because of the opening up of alternative possibilities to the binary of reproduction. And yet, the insistence that it has to be a man and a woman, and reproduction has to happen “naturally,” is part of the backlash. It is complicated because there was that book by Lee Edelman which is called *No future*,<sup>24</sup> which caused tremendous argument in gay circles. Because he was seen as saying, “We will not reproduce. If gay sex is seen as being about the death drive and about the end of reproductive possibilities, fine. We will take it.” And then, there were people like José Muñoz and Judith Butler, who said no. We are not about ending the species, we are not about ending reproduction. We are just about doing it in a different way.

*It was a very androcentric book, though. He wrote *Child with a capital C* and tried to mark a difference in regard to the child as a human being, but I still think that questions of care, of*

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23 Joan Scott, *Sex and secularism* (2018).

24 Lee Edelman, *No future: Queer theory and the death drive* (2004).

*what children can mean and do to one's life, and of the specific commitment to small humans that women as well as men of color are disproportionately involved in are not addressed in the book. I had trouble with that.*

I actually thought it was really interesting as a diagnosis of the way in which in straight society, and certainly in modernity, that in place of God or in place of immortality, one saw children as one's immortality. I thought he really put his finger on that. The reason he capitalized Child was to make that point—that precisely children had become an abstraction, a way to guarantee immortality.

*That is true, but written from a male and white perspective: Who has the license to believe in their immortality? And there are tons of other alternative ways of living with children, being with children, having children ...*

I do not think he was arguing that. I think he was diagnosing a particular social and cultural mentality. I do not think he was saying that was the only way to think about it. I think he was saying that was the dominant way it is thought about—certainly in American culture. And I thought that diagnosis was absolutely right.

*Maybe that is what I took issue with, not with the diagnosis, but with his conclusion, which to me seemed to be based in a very white gay male reality: "Let us stay happily away from that whole business of reproduction," as if that is a choice many of us would have. And besides that, he was missing out on a lot by drawing that conclusion.*

I thought the diagnosis was brilliant and the political solution was not good enough. But I also thought the political solution was somehow also parodic. It was like "Okay, if this is what you are going to think about us, we will do it," a kind of in-your-face-politics. But in any case, it is interesting, also in relation to what we were talking about a few minutes ago, about how you respond to the backlash. If the backlash says, "You are going to deprive us of the future of children," and the answer is "Oh no, we are going to give you all the children you want," it makes it harder to make the argument for a different kind of mandate for reproduction than the one which was about race, family, and the nation. It is like the arguments about gay marriage. That one had to buy into a certain kind of romantic vision of marriage per se, "We love each other, too," which simplified the challenge that was being offered by the alternative kinds of politics, a more radical gender politics. And I think that is always a tension. You have to defend yourself against the stereotypical charges made against you, even as you are trying to articulate a much more complicated insight, a more radical insight, into what gay liberation movements actually represent.

*Yes, I fully agree. What is interesting is how gender has shifted its meanings within these social processes. There was a time of gender mainstreaming, gender at the UN, gender in every corporation, gender in the administration, gender everywhere. It was a time when it was hard to have a politically radical approach to gender any longer. Because it has been taken away by so much neoliberal talk. Now, you have right-wing people who do not want to work with gender*

*at all. To them, gender represents the perversity of everything relating to ideas of social justice and equality. It is a demonized term. I still do not know what we can do with this, to be honest.*

And the un-demonizing of gender requires making it more benign than we would want it to be.

*Yes. But do we have to do that?*

I just think it is a tension that we have to live with. On the one hand, we say gender is a description of the way societies and cultures decide what it means to be male or female, while at the same time defending the right of those with different gender identities to have a place in society, to be hired and respected. On the other hand, we need to keep asking questions that amount to a critique of those descriptions as fixed, immutable identities, pointing to the long history of gender nonconformity that these days includes queer and trans and asking what enables their emergence as movements.

That is why we need to protect feminist seminars and programs for women's, gender, and sexuality studies. We need to be able to talk to each other about what we think is going on. It is the theoretical investigations we need to do, even as we are doing more simple political work.

*Thank you so much, Joan, for this conversation.*

The conversation took place online on May 10 and 18, 2021.

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