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As part of the special issue "The Polemics of History: Historiographical Debates and Public Life", Elisa Lopes da Silva, Bruno Peixe Dias and Marcos Cardão interviewed Joan Wallach Scott. This American historian, professor emerita in the School of Social Science in the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton, became known for her work on gender history, engaging with post-structuralist theory, critical theory and psychoanalysis in historiography throughout her long academic career. Scott's article "Is Gender a Useful Category of Historical Analysis?", published by *The American Historical Review* in 1986, pioneered the field that came to be known as gender history. Her latter writings grappled with how power relations were articulated through language, focusing on the history of France. This interview goes over Scott's most emblematic works – including her recent work on the historiography and politics of memory and reparations for past aggravations –, assessing her earlier approaches and theses, through the lenses of today. In 2019, "Theses on Theory and History", written by the Wild On Collective (Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Scott, Gary Wilder), intervened critically about the role of theory in current historiography.

Scott's work has often been the object of critical discussion within academia (from history to cultural studies), with its theoretical insights touching various domains (in areas such as feminism or secularism) and its political implications constantly relating to the public life.

Elisa Lopes da Silva, Bruno Peixe Dias, Marcos Cardão (ELS, BPD, MC): You first submitted the essay "Is Gender a Useful Category of Historical Analysis?" to the *American Historical Review* (AHR) in 1986, contributing decisively to the epistemological turmoil that was sweeping the humanities and the social sciences at the time. The editors asked you to remove the question mark, explaining that question marks were not allowed in the titles of articles, which seems to reveal a resistance to embracing forms of problematization in the field of history. Question marks in titles are nowadays commonplace in articles and other academic texts, although problematization, or conceptualization, is still largely absent, or poorly incorporated, in historiographical discourse. Looking back from 35 years after the original publication, how would you assess the polemics surrounding your initial project?

Joan Scott (JS): I'm not sure what you mean by polemics: those who objected to my feminist work? those who denounced poststructuralist theory? There was some of both in response to that 1986 article. Conservative historians dismissed me as a philosopher (which I took to be a compliment); feminists were disturbed by what they rightly perceived to be my critique of a women's history limited to recovering instances of women's agency in the past. I wrote that piece in the midst of debates among feminists about the advisability of substituting gender for women; some feared that women would disappear as proper objects of inquiry. In fact, the opposite was most often the case; initially, in much of its early usage, gender was simply a synonym for women. The word implied a kind of compensatory writing of history—where there had always been men, now there were women too.

ELS, BPD, MC: Gender is not only a constitutive element of social relations based on the perceived differences between the sexes, but it is also "a primary way of signifying relationships of power", a set of norms and practices through which power is articulated. This double take on gender presented in the article allows us not only to describe and analyze the

structural social inequalities between the sexes, but also to conceptualize the social construction of sexual difference, and to extend that conceptualization to other power relations as well. However, the two parts of the definition of gender had very different historiographical consequences and "critical fortunes". Gender as a constitutive element of social relations based on the perceived differences between the sexes was welcomed by academia (even if it was circumscribed to specific university departments or used as a mere complement to a History without adjectives). Meanwhile, gender as one of the main forms of signifying power relations, of understanding their articulations, was incorporated in a much smaller scale. There are studies on how politics constructs gender yet much less historiographical interest in how gender constructs politics, i.e., how the meaning of "woman" and "man" has been shaped through power relations. Do you agree, and, if so, why do you think this is the case?

JS: You say this really well. There have been many studies of how politics (understood as relations of power) construct gender, of the force field of male/female relationships, and far fewer of how gender constructs politics, that is how the understanding of male/female, masculine/feminine matters in areas that aren't literally always about women and men. Citizenship is a good example. I argue in *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (1996) that the right to vote conferred masculinity, rather than that being a man—white, propertied— entitled one to citizenship. Metaphors of naturalized sex difference abound in discourses of war, science, secularism—to take only a few examples. Those metaphors at once construct meanings for non-gendered activity *and* give meaning to gender. So the absence of women as generals or politicians implicitly demonstrates their physical inability (biology disqualifies them) to inhabit those positions—gender constructs politics and politics construct gender.

ELS, BPD, MC: In 2008, you wrote that "Paradoxically, the history of women has kept 'women' outside history". The critique is even sharper:

"Attention to gender, which emanated from the field of women's history, has not so much historicized "women" as it has worked with a fixed meaning for the category, taking the physical commonality of females as a synonym for a collective entity designated 'women'." Feminist politics gave visibility to women, opening the way for an affirmation of women as subjects of historical research and political claims. However, the emergence of a new subject of history – woman, in the singular – has tended to cast a shadow on the process of sexual differentiation and to reinforce the sexual binary. If there is no essence of the feminine or the masculine that can provide a stable referent for our histories, but only successive iterations of a word without a stable referent, can we say that, today, it is the category of sex (or sexual differentiation) that needs to be problematized or historicized? All the more so since it's a category that has been at the center of some important contemporary feminist disputes.

JS: The category of sex has certainly been problematized and historicized. Think of Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976) or Denise Riley's *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History (*1988*)* or Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) to take only a few examples. Riley's book best addresses the question you raise about feminist politics essentializing "women." Riley argues that the mistake we make is to take feminism's invocation of a consolidated subject (women) — a necessary strategic move in a specific historical political context — outside its context, treating it (women) as an eternally same subject and thereby reproducing the biological definition we want to contest. In those comments I made in 2008, I was expressing my frustration with the many historians of women and gender (as well as policy makers at national and international levels) who hadn't read or fully appreciated the critical work that Foucault, Riley, Butler, and I (among others) were trying to do.

ELS, BPD, MC: Throughout your work, you address how gender may operate in the production of apparently unrelated domains in the

field of politics. If "Gender constructs politics and politics constructs gender", and academia is itself a field of power, how has gender, as a category of analysis, reshaped the way of making and writing history? As Hayden White once put it, "Every discipline is made up of a set of restrictions on thought and imagination, and none is more hedged about with taboos than professional historiography". How, then, did gender shape the discipline of History not only institutionally (through gender imbalance in academic tenure-track positions or funded-research themes), but also, and particularly, through the formal ways of writing history (structure, rhetoric, reasoning, etc.)? In other words, is there a masculine historiography?

JS: Of course, men controlled the writing of history for generations (Bonnie Smith's book, *The Gender of History,* beautifully documents this), deciding not only the topics worthy of inclusion, but effectively excluding most women from joining their ranks. The challenge feminists posed to this monopoly has had important effects; it took a long time (the last decades of the twentieth century) for women, sex, sexuality, and gender to become legitimate topics for research, and also for the styles of writing about these topics to loosen what I think of as the orthodox conventions of conservative, professional historiography. Those old stylistic conventions persist in some of the leading journals in the field, but the proliferation of competing journals and the openness of publishers to new forms of historical writing, along with challenges from a variety of scholars — feminist, post-colonial, students of African American history, and of slavery in particular — have loosened the hold and the appeal of the old ways of writing history.

ELS, BPD, MC: Secularism has been seen as a historical triumph of enlightened reason over religion and a guarantee of freedom and gender equality. You disputed the neutral civic and political position claimed by secularism by positioning it in the political field and showing how it is a discourse and practice invested in concrete forms of racial, national

and sexual domination. The French translation of your book Sex and Secularism is even called La religion de la laïcité. Almost two decades after you wrote your book on the politics of the veil, and on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, how would you assess the power of this "religion of secularism" today? Does the triumphalist narrative of secular reason continue to shape western politics as well as history writing?

JS: I think we have to distinguish among various instances of "Western politics" when we talk about secularism. In France, as the title of the translation of *Sex and Secularism* was meant to imply, secularism has become something of a national religion. Most recently, the Ministry of Education and the President, Emmanuel Macron, have threatened to crack down on scholarship that studies discrimination and racism in that country, by suggesting that it violates the original, secular principles of the Republic. French racism, these officials suggest, is not racism at all, but a refusal of the influences of religion—in the current case, Islam—on the secular culture and politics of the nation. In sharp contrast, the political right in the U.S. abhors secular influences and insists on the Christian origins of the nation. The majority of the U.S. Supreme Court now consists of justices who have reinterpreted the Constitution to protect (Christian) religious practices and institutions. Elsewhere, in some of the former Soviet republics (Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland) secular reason has been replaced by a return to Christian "values," invoked not only to exclude Muslims, but to impugn the motives and beliefs of feminists, queer activists, and representatives of racial and ethnic minorities. As for history writing, there has been, at least in the U.S., a spate of books critically examining the processes of secularization, as they transformed not only economic and political thinking, but religious practices as well. Paradoxically, while secularization has become an object of historical analysis, it has lost some of its hold on politics and policy in a number of Western countries. It will be up to the next generation of historians to figure out how and why this is so.

ELS, BPD, MC: In the "Theses on Theory and History" manifesto, written by the Wild On Collective (Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Scott, Gary Wilder), you choose the form of the "manifesto" to criticize the realist epistemology, empiricist methodology and archival fetishism of historiography. The manifesto is a particular genre, one that presupposes a moment of crisis and generally calls on action to overcome the situation in question. So, with that in mind, our question is: what is to be done to, for, or with History?

JS: The manifesto was meant to call attention to what we think is a backlash among "orthodox" historians against what they disdainfully dismiss as "theory." The backlash took the form of heralding an empirical turn to replace the (outdated or exhausted) linguistic turn. We wanted to insist on the continuing importance of various theories (Marxism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminist and queer theory) for writing history and in that way support the historians and graduate students who were being discouraged from thinking their materials with different theoretical approaches. The crisis we perceived was one which would foreclose the openings to new interpretations and to critical work that had appeared in the 1980s and 90s. The response we got to our manifesto suggested its relevance: graduate students wrote thanking us, junior historians told us of their tenure struggles, the manifesto was discussed at conferences and in introductory graduate seminars. At the very least, we reopened a conversation and gave some legitimacy to the importance of theory for history.

ELS, BPD, MC: In *The Judgment of History* (2018), you defend that even if History's ability to contribute to the quest for justice seems very restricted or even non-existent, the past continues to haunt the present, either through memories, spectral survivals, or unfinished projects. How can we imagine a historiography that addresses the problem of the persistence or survival of the past and, in parallel, rethink the boundaries between past and present, especially the idea that the past is distant and unalterable?

JS: For me, this historiography is what Foucault called history of the present. Not the recounting of contemporary events, but the critical interrogation of the naturalized categories with which we organize our writing about past and present. Where do those categories come from? What relations of power produced and sought to sustain them? How do they operate to maintain the status quo or bring about change? Instead of assuming that the past is past or that it necessarily gave rise to the present in its current form, we need to ask how these categories of the past in its relation to the present work to make the way we live now seem inevitable. There's a whole school of historians emerging (Massimiliano Tomba, Gary Wilder, Kristen Ross, Andi Zimmerman, Todd Shepard) who are intent on rewriting the past to illuminate the power struggles that resulted in what historians and politicians then took to be the inevitable course of history. They maintain that by exploring the foreclosed and defeated options and the manner of their foreclosure or defeat, we will understand history not as an inevitable, linear trajectory of past to present, but as a site of struggle and as a resource for thinking alternatives to our present, as well as to our understanding of the past.

ELS, BPD, MC: In the same book, you claim you do not "believe in the judgment of history as a concept", with all the moral teleological weight it carries. Can we say that the judgment of the historian takes the place of the judgment of history as the source of normativity in evaluating the past and, above all, the uses of the past in the present?

JS: Well, yes and no. Yes, because, of course, our views of what counts as ethics, justice, or equality, inform our writing of history. Objectivity is a cover for views of that kind; none of us (right or left) is purely objective, some kind of judgment enters our choice of subject matter, interpretive approach, and analysis. But no because the concept of the judgment of history is not the same as the idea the historians exercise judgment in doing their work. The judgment of history carries universalist, moral, and teleological weight that brooks no nuance or alterna-

tive. It has a certain finality to it. The judgment of the historian is of a different order. In fact, I prefer to think of what historians like myself do as critical history — not so much judgment of what is good or bad, but the exploration of the complex operations of power that revise how we understand the relationship of present to past. The goal is not a final moral assessment, the dishing out of praise or condemnation; it is instead a way of making things more complex, more open to revision, more difficult to categorize, more sensitive to difference, more tentative in the kinds of conclusions it can reach.

ELS, BPD, MC: The idea of "being on the right side of history", as the idea of the judgment of history, carries a moral teleology that has been an essential component of several left-wing and so called "progressive" movements, namely feminist and anti-racist movements. Could we say that history, in the narrative of the left, plays a similar role to human nature and naturalist arguments in general in the right-wing narratives?

JS: I don't think "being on the right side of history" is only a left-wing argument, though certainly the designation of "progressive" for the movements you cite implies that. Those who use naturalist or religious arguments on the right also invoke the need to be on "the right side of history," though in a less secular vein. I think progressives tend to ask how political mobilization can happen without a belief that the future will bring us relief from present injustice. In fact, as I say at the end of my book, that was a question my colleagues raised when I gave the Benedict Lectures. "Don't we need to have some assurance of the inevitability of justice to fight for it," they asked. My answer is no, that political mobilization for "our" causes rests on the determination of people not to accept unjust conditions—I cite Foucault's discussion of the refusal to live like this. We don't have to act with the assurance that our cause will win (an assurance provided by the telos of history), we act because our ethical principles give us no other choice.

ELS, BPD, MC: You criticize the ways in which invocations of the judgment of history have assumed the nation-state to be the ultimate ground for rectifying the suffering of victims of injustice, and the form of historical teleology that sees the state as the ultimate provider of sense and moral judgment to historical processes. How, then, are we to regard the so-called "state-sponsored history"? Do you think it can transform history and public memory or is it doomed to reinforce the tropes of a national official narrative?

JS: I think you are asking me two different questions here. The first is about whether we can consider the nation-state the ultimate source of justice. The answer to that is no, there are too many conflicting interests at play in juridical decisions to guarantee a just outcome every time. We have only to look at the history of African Americans to see that this is the case; despite some major legislation advancing civil rights, the structural racism of the country persists.

Your second question is about official histories, narratives that aim at consolidating national identity, homogenizing a people, glorifying its past. Those are always the stories told by the victors in power struggles that official histories then downplay or obscure. They are usually exclusionary (favoring the majority's experience); most often they are linear and Whiggish; often, too, they are told in terms of friends and enemies. That they are subject to change doesn't make them less open to criticism, since even so-called revisionist histories tend to adhere to a singular dominant narrative. It has been interesting, these last few years, to watch the ways in which attempts to rewrite U.S. history to highlight the discriminatory trail of structural racism has provoked a huge backlash. When Trump was president, he sought to replace the critical story that focused on slavery (the 1619 Project—1619 being the year that enslaved people were first brought to America) with a heroic story of white American heroes (the 1776 project). And, in recent days, state legislatures under Republican control have been passing legislation outlawing the teaching of "critical race theory" in public schools, colleges, and universities. The point of this legislation is to protect the story of white America as it has long been told, a story of progress (sci-

entific, social, economic) against all odds, occasional downturns, and unfortunate episodes of racism (slavery, lynching, Jim Crow).

ELS, BPD, MC: In the conclusion to your last book, you deconstruct the regulatory idea of a substantialized history whose judgment provides a retroactive moral ground to evaluate political positions. You propose, instead, a contingent understanding of history, starting from the recognition that the historiographical operation has political consequences. The gesture of writing history necessarily involves assuming a political position in the present. Can we say that, for you, history writing is constitutively polemic?

JS: I'd say history writing is constitutively political, in the sense that it critically questions established relations of power, naturalized categories of analysis, and so-called common-sense explanations for events. But I wouldn't call it polemical. Polemical suggests that the arguments might not be grounded in evidence to support it, might not adhere to disciplinary rules about what does and does not count as fact or truth, might place greater emphasis on the force of the argument than its rigor or concern for accuracy. For all our criticism of orthodox history, we (the manifesto writers) nonetheless adhere to certain disciplinary practices: the need to ground our interpretations in sources, to cite those sources, to take into account things that may contradict our arguments, to produce credible readings of the past. Of course, the rules change—as demonstrated by the expansion of what counts as history to groups such as women and minorities, and to topics such as sex, sexuality, and race—but the commitment to evidentiary support for interpretive readings remains a rule I want to follow in my own work.

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