

# rites and responsibilities

A DIALOGUE SERIES ON SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL



## “SECULARISM . . . A REALLY INTERESTING PROBLEMATIC”

A CONVERSATION WITH JOAN WALLACH SCOTT

MARCH 2010

*At a March 2010 conference, “Gendering the Divide: Conflicts at the Border of Religion and the Secular” (sponsored by Arizona State University’s Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict), I had the great fortune to speak on a panel with groundbreaking cultural historian and gender theorist Joan Wallach Scott, the Harold F. Linder Professor in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ. The conference was the third and final meeting of ASU’s Ford Foundation-funded project on “Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age.” In 2010-2011, Scott will lead the year-long seminar “Secularism” at the Institute for Advanced Study’s School of Social Science.*

*Scott is the author of numerous influential essays and books, including the widely cited 1986 essay “Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” as well as *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth Century City*, *Women, Work and Family* (with Louise Tilly), *Parité!: Sexual Difference and the Crisis of French Universalism*, and, most recently, the timely and highly praised *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University Press, 2007). Scott’s books are regularly reprinted, and they have been translated into several languages, including French, Japanese, Portuguese, and Korean.*

*There will be a panel on *The Politics of the Veil* at the upcoming annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, featuring commentaries by Carl Ernst and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, along with myself, as well as a response from Scott.*

*An indefatigable advocate for and defender of academic freedom of expression and speech, Scott served on the American Association of University Professors’ “Committee A” on Academic Freedom and Tenure from 1993-2006, which she chaired from 1999-2005. As Chair of “Committee A,” Scott helped to produce the 2003 report “Academic Freedom and National Security in a Time of Crisis.”*

*At the conclusion of the ASU conference, Scott and I met for the following wide-ranging conversation, part of the SSRC’s Rites & Responsibilities dialogue forum.*

David Kyuman Kim  
Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Connecticut College  
Senior Advisor, SSRC & Editor-at-Large, *The Immanent Frame*

*DKK: Joan, because people know you as many things—as a theorist of gender, as a cultural historian, as an inveterate advocate for academic freedom and defender of the rights of the professoriate—I'm curious how you would describe yourself to someone who had never met Joan Scott.*

JWS: That's really hard . . . I don't know. I would say I was a historian . . . Somebody who—despite the fact that I'm at the Institute for Advanced Study—likes to teach, and has tried to keep teaching graduate students, even in this position where I'm not required to do so. I guess I think of myself as somebody who's critically engaged with the work that I do, and whose work—even before I read Foucault and learned about the history of the present—always had a political dimension to it. There was always a reason, beyond just curiosity, that drove the work that I did.

*DKK: Well, let's pursue the question of what the work is. How would you describe the work that you do? Not just the topics, but the approaches you take, the methods you have adopted.*

JWS: I would call it critical. I think we now have a term—more and more people are using it—which is “critical history.”

*DKK: Yes.*

JWS: And that suggests that the point of doing the history is to critically engage some conceptual or theoretical or taken-for-granted notion about why things are the way they are, and how they got to be the way they are. “Critical historian” is, in fact, what I call myself in a piece I did a couple of years ago in a volume edited by John Gillis and Jim Banner, which is called [Becoming Historians](#). The University of Chicago Press published it. They asked twelve people to account for their lives! I called my chapter “Finding Critical History.” In it, I try to account for the way in which I came to do the sort of history that I think I do.

*DKK: So that's a really interesting question, about finding critical history. One of the curiosities I have about you concerns your influences. Who and what were critical formations for you? Not just ideas and texts, but the people who were formative for you: family, colleagues, students, and so on.*

JWS: Right. Well, I talk about it a lot in that essay. First, I grew up in a political household. My father was a high school teacher in New York City, the president of the New York City Teachers' Union in the late '40s and early '50s. He was called before various congressional committees, and he was among the first group of New York City schoolteachers to be fired in 1953, when I was twelve. So, you know, my life was defined by growing up as somebody in a kind of embattled family in the 1950s—“embattled” just vis-à-vis the political culture, not within the family itself. My mother was also a teacher, but she wasn't ever fired. They were both history teachers—he, economics and history, and she, history.

*DKK: So, from a young age you had an acute sense of what politically fraught conditions were like, but also of the significance of history.*

JWS: Yes. Their bible was Charles and Mary Beard's [The Rise of American Civilization](#). That was the way they taught their history. That was the history that we learned. And, you know, dinner table conversation was about politics and history and teaching, because both of them were dedicated teachers. But I think the reasons I became a historian have less to do with following in their footsteps than with the subsequent influence on me of teachers when I was in high school and college.

*DKK: Wow.*

JWS: But there was no question that I was going to teach, because teaching was the family profession.

*DKK: Can you speak a bit more about that? How did they speak to you as a child?*

JWS: About teaching?

*DKK: Yes.*

JWS: Well, my mother clearly loved to teach. She'd come home . . . it was the way she told stories about the kids she was teaching—about this one who was so smart but never did any work, and that one who asked these amazing questions. And my father was didactic!

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: I mean, my father was a teacher. You know, you didn't *want* to have to *always* be taught everything, and that was his mode, to always be teaching. So there was more of a kind of resistance to him and a kind of admiration for her. Teaching was not only about communicating things, not only “raising the young to become better than they otherwise might have been.” It was also—because it was history—about social change: there was some way or another in which communicating exciting ideas to young people was an investment in the future.

*DKK: But in that context there was, first of all, the volatility of the situation around Left politics, and then, at the same time, there was the influence of, say, Dewey, on democracy and education. In other words, there was a concerted effort to say, “Education is in the service of democracy,” while, at the same time, there were events like your father’s firing.*

JWS: Right, right.

*DKK: Did you talk about that as a child?*

JWS: No, we didn't talk about it. But what went without saying . . . well, I actually have another article! It's in that Louis Menand book on academic freedom, in which I say that from a very young age I heard the words “academic freedom” without fully knowing what they meant, because what my father always said when he was fired was that his academic freedom had been violated, that it had been lost. It was less the loss of his job than the loss of his academic freedom that was at the heart of his refusal to accept the punishment he got for refusing to cooperate with these investigating committees.

*DKK: Did he ever get his job back? Or did he find that he could redeem himself as an educator?*

JWS: Well, in different formats. For a while he worked for an educational filmstrip company, and so he got to teach in another way. And then, the last job he had was in some ways the most interesting: he was the administrator of a unit for the diagnosis and treatment of what are now called developmentally disabled kids. Then, it was “mentally retarded” kids. And he was doing that at the moment of de-institutionalization following the scandals around [Willowbrook](#), when Geraldo Riviera was an investigative journalist, rather than a sensationalist journalist!

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: And he was very active in those movements. I always thought that his political skills came to the fore around those kinds of things. He was somebody who worked very hard for the setting-up of group homes and all of that kind of stuff. There it was both the politics and his sense of commitment to kids—even though these were not kids whom he was teaching in quite the same way. Nonetheless, that was really exemplary and quite impressive.

*DKK: You've maintained that co-incident yourself between being a teacher and a scholar and an activist.*

JWS: Yes, and that, I think, was the model. It was a model that somehow always made sense, and something that I always tried to do, or something that, without thinking about it consciously, I just did, as the fulfillment of the legacy of these parents who were doing both of those things at once too.

*DKK: So, what are the forms, what are the expressions of that co-incident for you, in terms of your teaching and your activism?*

JWS: Well, for a long time, they were at odds. When I was an undergraduate in college—I went to Brandeis—I did my scholarly work and I did my politics, and I always felt divided. Schizophrenic is the wrong word, because I could do both, but I always felt that they were two separate things. Then I started graduate school at the University of Wisconsin in 1962. William Appleman Williams was there; [Studies on the Left](#) was there. I found a world in which doing scholarship was of a piece with doing politics. I mean, we did anti-Vietnam War protests and Civil Rights activism. There was all of this political activity, but there were also people who were thinking about history in those terms as well. That was, I think, a hugely important influence for me—to be able to see that you could do the two together, and that history was relevant, not in the immediate sense of proving a political point, but in that there was the possibility of an engagement with history that could feed into politics or activism of one kind or another.

*DKK: Did you feel at that time that you were part of both an intellectual movement and a political movement?*

JWS: Yes.

*DKK: It felt of a piece?*

JWS: It felt of a piece. Although, the point at which I felt that most fully was with feminism. It was when I started to teach women's history, and write women's history, and become fully engaged in the project of thinking about bringing women into visibility in the historical record first, and then in thinking about gender as a way of analyzing what I was finding. I think that I felt most together in these realms at Brown, where I was one of the founders of the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women. There it felt like it all came together: institutional politics, the more general sense of feminist politics, and scholarly work.

*DKK: For someone in my generation, that almost sounds ideal—you know, this coming together of different strands of one's life: one's intellectual work, one's political commitments, and so on.*

JWS: Yes.

*DKK: Was this an aspiration for you when you were younger?*

JWS: No, I don't think so. One of the things I say in the article—and it's always been interesting to me to think about, although I have no sense of why, exactly—is that, as a good, dutiful kid, I always did what you were supposed to do next. So, I finished high school and I went to college.

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: I thought I'd become a high school teacher like my parents. But in college, everybody said, “Well, you know, you should go into graduate school, you should think about graduate school.” So I thought, “Okay. Why not go to graduate school?” And I just kind of *did* this stuff. I was always a good student, but not a fabulous student. I was just a good student. You know, I performed well, which is what I learned how to do as a kid.

*DKK: I'm curious, though—what kept you feeling like you should persist? I mean, I can imagine, for example, thinking “I'm an okay student . . .”*

JWS: Right.

*DKK: “I can get by . . .”*

JWS: No, I really liked it! I liked learning. There was a high school course that I *loved*—it was an AP course taught by a guy in English—and that's where I learned to read and to care about language. If I had to retrospectively construct the unfolding of my development, that course is the place, I would say, that

language came into view for me as something that was exciting and amazing to think about. You can read poetry and think about metaphor. I didn't even know any of that before I took that course.

*DKK: What were you reading? Do you remember?*

JWS: Well, what he used as the texts were Brooks and Warren's [\*Understanding Fiction\*](#) and [\*Understanding Poetry\*](#), which were the handbooks of the New Criticism. But why I went on in history, instead of English, was less because of my parents than because, when I got to Brandeis, there was a professor in the required Western Civ. course, Frank Manuel . . .

*DKK: Oh, sure!*

JWS: . . . and he was an amazing lecturer, and I was totally captivated. First I took Western Civ., which he taught as an intellectual historian, and then I took his intellectual history course. And that was what really got me—it was he and the others in that department, who were just incredibly exciting teachers. And the English Department was less interesting at that point, or, at least, I came across it in a less interesting way.

*DKK: But do you find yourself consciously reading history or writing history in a literary mode?*

JWS: Only in the last couple of years! You know, only when I had grown up enough to think I could take risks!

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: Actually, when I wrote that piece, the autobiographical piece, I thought, "Okay, this is not going to be 'the context'; this is going to be some other form that I can play with." And so it's much more self-conscious as it *tells* the story.

*DKK: So, is there a form or a style that you could discern in your early work that developed over the years?*

JWS: I think I always wrote clearly, and I can't tell you why. Some of it was my father's impatience with big words. We used to have huge fights about that. There was one word particularly—I can't remember it now—but I would use these words in things that I wrote, and he would say, "Why can't you just say it simply? Why can't you just say it another way?" And I would say, "Well, because it's *argh!*" But I think it always got to me. He was a tremendously important influence. He was not only my father but my teacher, the person I had to please in life. And, you know, it had its good and bad aspects!

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: But I think there was something to that: if you're going to write, you have to do it so that you can communicate to *anybody*, and not just to an elite group of educated people like yourself.

*DKK: Well, you know, as I told you when we spoke earlier, I admire the clarity of your writing so much. And seeing you at this conference here at ASU, I admire the generosity of spirit with which you engage other people. It's clearly about communicating. So I am thinking about all of this partially in the context of the ways in which you take on questions of gender, feminism, and women's history as a labor historian.*

JWS: Labor historian, right. I went to graduate school in 1962. E.P. Thomson's [\*The Making of the English Working Class\*](#) was published in '63. On the one hand, there were the British social historians. On the other hand, there was the Annales School. And on "the third hand," Chuck Tilly and the quantitative historical move. All of which were about social history, about reconstructing communities of ordinary people.

*DKK: Reconstruction is an interesting word, right? Particularly in regard to questions of gender.*

JWS: Hm. Yes, that's right. It never occurred to me. I mean, when I did family reconstitutions, as I did for [The Glassworkers of Carmaux](#), I wanted to know who the wives' fathers were. I was interested in the generational, or inter-generational, transmission of skills, of artisan's skills. I did ask what the women were doing, but most of them stayed at home. That is, it was as daughters and wives that most of them figured in my book—not as subjects of their own history, and thus not as the objects of my historical investigation.

*DKK: So, what was the tipping point for you, then?*

JWS: The Women's Movement—though not for me, but for my students. I first taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and there was a group of people who were doing feminist scholarly work, and we all would meet and talk and read together. But it never really occurred to me to actually teach it until I went to Northwestern, where I was the only woman in the department.

*DKK: Out of how many folks?*

JWS: Twenty-five or thirty. I think I was the first one they hired, too. Hanna Gray was the Dean, so she was also in the department. But that was different, as she wasn't teaching. And the students wanted courses in women's history. The same thing happened to Louise Tilly, with whom I collaborated on [Women, Work, and Family](#). But that happened to a lot of us! You know, we were up-and-coming social historians. The move from working-class history to women's history wasn't so hard, because you were doing, in either case, the history of . . . what was it, “the inarticulate,” in those days?

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: You know, the people who had no voices, and we were giving them a voice—all the things that are now horribly suspect! When Gayatri Spivak asked, “[Can the Subaltern Speak?](#)” the answer was, “No! At least not through you.”

*DKK: Right! (LAUGHS)*

JWS: What I mean to say is that the move from social history—from one group of people whom one had to sort of reconstitute, or search for, to another such group—wasn't that difficult to do. And I was surrounded by other people who had also trained as social historians, who were women, who were in the same situation. But it was the students, at least in my case, who pushed us—students who were asking, “Well, where is *her* story?”

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: And then there was the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, founded in the '20s or early '30s by women who wanted a way to think about their relationship to the historical profession. It was revived in the early '70s and it started sponsoring conferences on women's history. That became the meeting ground, a place where we made contacts, learned what others were working on, argued interpretations and traded reading lists. It was like samizdat literature, reading Natalie Davis's and Jill Conway's reading lists from the University of Toronto, and reading other lists from other places! We'd send them around, and they weren't even xeroxed, they were . . . with that purple stuff . . .

*DKK: Mimeographs and things like that?*

JWS: Well, not even mimeographs! It was some other process, even cheaper than mimeographing. But this stuff would come in the mail and we would copy each other's things, or make extra copies and send them around. And I remember teaching things I'd never read before. I'd take the syllabus—I'd steal it—and I'd use it for my course and read a week or two ahead of my students! And sometimes I'd think, “Oh my God. How am I going to teach this? I don't understand what this is!” And at other times, I had no trouble teaching it, but it was this unbelievable kind of network.

*DKK: And excitement!*

JWS: Enormous excitement! It is really difficult to explain this sense of discovery and of wading into these unknown waters and finding colleagues, as Louise and I found each other. We'd meet at a conference of some kind or another and say, you know, "How are you gonna do this? What are you gonna do?" And then we'd write back and forth. You made friendships that were just extraordinary as well, because you were on this voyage of discovery together. It was an amazing time.

*DKK: That is amazing. And it is striking to me, especially when I consider the many conversations I have with my peers about the sense of having come after the great social movements.*

JWS: Right. The Golden Age is always behind you!

*DKK: Well, the Golden Age is behind you, but then . . . you describe it beautifully when you say that you experienced that "sense of discovery." And one doesn't necessarily find that sense among my generation of scholars . . .*

JWS: That's right!

*DKK: . . . in which it's less about a sense of discovery, and it's more about the professionalization of what you do.*

JWS: Yes, that's right. We were just, you know, out there! And one of the things we discovered was a whole bibliography of feminist history from the first feminist movement, from the 1920s and '30s, of all these women—Ivy Pinchbeck and Priscilla—people who had written on working class women in the Industrial Revolution, or women in the something-or-other. And we would say, "Oh my God, where was this stuff?" But we would find it in libraries, and then tell each other about it. So there was, at once, this discovery of unknown things and then the re-discovery of people who had been doing what we were doing—and also the sense that it could be lost, because all that work had been, in some ways, forgotten, and had dropped out of visibility. And so I think there was a greater commitment on the part of many of us to institutionalize women's history and scholarship about women more generally, to make sure that there would be Women's Studies *programs*, and not just courses that, if you disappeared, would disappear with you.

*DKK: Yes, and I think there are a lot of parallels with the ethnic studies movement.*

JWS: Yes!

*DKK: You know, you hear the same description: "I'm teaching things that I have no idea about!"*

JWS: "That they existed!"

*DKK: Yes, and, "I didn't know this stuff existed, but my students were demanding it."*

JWS: Right.

*DKK: You know, it's actually hard for me to imagine my students demanding from me a new curriculum.*

JWS: That's right!

*DKK: You know, "Professor Kim, we should be talking about this!" as opposed to me coming to them and saying, "We should be talking about these issues . . ."*

JWS: Right.

*DKK: Can we talk a little bit about your classic essay, "Gender . . ."*

JWS: "[Gender: A Useful Category](#)"! [sub. req.]

*DKK: A useful category! There are many, many things I admire about that piece. Let's start with the understated quality of the title. I find it fascinating.*

JWS: Well, first of all, it was originally a question mark. It was "Gender," *colon*, "a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *question mark*. And the editors of the *American Historical Review* said, "We don't put question marks in titles."

(KIM LAUGHS)

JWS: "It has to be just a statement, no interrogatories in it." So, in fact, a couple of years ago, the *American Historical Review*—you know, the forum . . .

*DKK: Yes.*

JWS: Okay, so I start by saying that, originally, the essay was supposed to have a question mark. I had just come to Brown in 1980 from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And at Brown there was an active group of feminists—but they were all in literature. Some of them are still there: Mary Ann Doane, who does film; Naomi Schor, who was in French, and who died a couple years ago; Ellen Rooney was there then, I believe; Elizabeth Weed, who is one of the founding editors of *differences*. So I got pulled into this group of literary types who were all reading post-structuralist, psychoanalytic texts that I had never, ever looked at. And we had a reading group from 1980 to when I wrote the article, which was in '85. So I was *full* of what I was learning at the Pembroke Center. I mean, I just couldn't believe how exciting finding that material was, because I had gotten to the point in teaching women's history, and in thinking about some of these questions, of feeling like there were more questions to ask, which I couldn't answer. I was getting bored with the making-women-visible mode of historiography, which is an important project, but which just . . .

*DKK: It can become a kind of boilerplate.*

JWS: Well, that's what started to happen. Cigar workers, cannery workers, seamstresses—it was the same story with different characters, or at least it felt like the same story. I think that what I wanted was some way of analyzing this material that was not being provided by either the various sorts of Marxist or other modes of analysis. So this reading was a revelation! And I still think that, for me, the moment of epistemological shock was Foucault's [\*The Order of Things\*](#) (*Les mots et les choses*). I couldn't believe it! And I remember having a conversation with Naomi Schor in this group, and I said something like, "Yes, but I'm not sure about the history part of this." And Naomi said to me, "But it's all about history! It's all about the way in which history becomes the explanation for everything." And I remember going home and thinking about it. You know how you do these things . . .

(KIM LAUGHS)

JWS: So, for me, it wasn't the thematic Foucault that a lot of people talk about. It wasn't [\*Discipline and Punish\*](#), or even the [\*History of Sexuality\*](#). Those texts are also epistemologically much more interesting than the way in which they are sometimes referred to or used. But it was *The Order of Things* and the way in which one could think history in a different way from that in which I had always thought about it—as continuity, as development. I think I had given up on teleology a long time before!

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: So, thinking in terms of breaks, in terms of events as conceptual ruptures—all of that kind of stuff was just so exciting!

*DKK: And it's a radically different way of thinking about the project of reconstructing history.*

JWS: Yes, it was. And it was terrifying also, because it was a challenge to what I felt quite confident about, to the way I had always written history, the way I had done history. It was both destabilizing and enormously exciting.

*DKK: Surely!*

JWS: You know, the way . . .

*DKK: When you're on the brink of something.*

JWS: Yes! So, all of that went into the writing of the “Gender” article. And what's interesting to me now, of course, is that the place where I was most resistant was psychoanalysis. And now I think that psychoanalysis is the next piece that one needs in order to put together these puzzles of what gender is about. I talked a little bit about that yesterday—sexual difference as a place, not a settled place, but a place of enormous anxiety and difficulty. If you think about gender as the attempt to impose normative regulation on this source of anxiety and enormously productive fantasy, and to somehow bring it all under control, psychoanalysis seems to me to be an incredibly useful thing to have to think with. But at the moment of writing that gender article, it was the place where I drew the line.

*DKK: What was the resistance at that point?*

JWS: I think part of it was that psychoanalysis seemed to be somehow ahistorical and universalizing. This was a residue of my historical training. And all of my historical commitments were about “relativizing”—a bad word to use—rather, about, well, historicizing, insisting on mutability, that nothing was fixed. And what I think I didn't understand about the psychoanalytic project is that of course there's history in psychoanalysis—and not only the individual's—but that it's the problematic of sexual difference that may be universal, though not the solutions to it. The problematic being: How do you account for these differences? What are they?

*DKK: And the ways those problematics are posed, not just as questions, but as fundamental challenges.*

JWS: Right. That's a nice way of putting it.

*DKK: Those fundamental challenges continue to appear in your work. This is a fairly obvious transition, I think, to [The Politics of the Veil](#), in which you tell a series of narratives about anxieties. . .*

(SCOTT LAUGHS)

*DKK: . . . anxieties about France and that the French possess. And you discuss the ways in which those narratives might be deeply troubling, not just to someone who is French, but to the idea of France itself.*

JWS: Mm-hmm, yes.

*DKK: As you know, part of the rationale for this dialogue series is to raise questions about authority, accountability, and sovereignty. And as I was preparing for our conversation, I was thinking about this question about the sovereignty of gender, and the ways in which that's posed over and against claims about the sovereignty of France, for example—or the culture of France.*

JWS: Well, there's a piece that I'm trying to write right now about the ways in which the two are articulated together. And, in fact—I think I say this in the last chapter of *The Politics of the Veil*—the interesting thing about some of the French Republicans', or the ideological republicans' response to Islam and to the veil—but even before that, to feminism and to gay rights movements—is to insist carefully that they're not essentialist. They're not saying that biology determines anything. They're saying that culture does, and that history does—so that the French way of doing sex, for example, is about flirtation, openness, and uncoveredness. I think it was Nasira who was talking recently about *le commerce de sexe* and that notion of “the sexual exchange” as highly charged, highly eroticized.

*DKK: You had mentioned it's a pun on "intercourse," right?*

JWS: Well, *commerce* is the word for intercourse, also. So I translate the *commerce de sexe* sometimes—deliberately—as “sexual exchange,” but often as “sexual intercourse,” in the sense in which intercourse, here as well, is about conversation, it's about commerce.

*DKK: Right!*

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: But what happens with these Republicans, starting around 1989, is that they tie a certain style of sexual intercourse, or sexual commerce, to national identity. And there's a spate of books, starting with a special issue of *Le Débat* in 1989, in which a philosopher, Phillippe Raynaud, argues that the French heritage of the absolute monarchy is a style of aristocratic flirtation, or behavior between the sexes, that happily gets transmitted into democracy. So the preventive against the worst excesses of democracy, which is the dissolution of all difference, are these traces of aristocratic behavior, which inform the way in which the sexes deal with each other, and this is part of French national character.

*DKK: Seduction and not manipulation, right?*

JWS: Seduction, in which everybody's playing the game.

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: They're equal partners and everybody knows the rules and it's all a game. Seduction is the style of French gender relations. So, how can you have rules about sexual harassment? How can you have any of this kind of stuff? How can you have homosexuality? Because that's about no-difference; that is, it's two women or two men, so there's no difference.

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: And what's required for the game is the play of difference in seduction. There's a woman, Claude Habib, who wrote a book called *Galanterie française*, in which she argues that this kind of courteous, seductive behavior—in which women are different from men, accept their difference, and learn to play it—is, again, the mark of French national character. So it becomes a nationalist argument.

*DKK: This brings together a number of pieces of that I want to talk about. On the one hand, you talk about this commitment to the necessity of difference, and yet there is also a desire to represent the singularity of the principle of equality, represented, for example, in French-style democracy. These are, as you just said, aristocratic histories. Right?*

JWS: That's right! And more than that, the women aren't equal to the men. It's all about the necessity of a certain kind of subordination as part of the game. You get to have influence—enormous influence—as a woman, by knowing how to play the game of seduction, which means, in part, accepting the inequality that's built into it. Complementarity is offered as a substitute for perfect equality, because perfect equality means the elimination of difference, and that is, according to these writers, homosexuality.

*DKK: Right. So if you're complicit in this unequal system, and you know how to game the system, as it were . . .*

JWS: Then it's fine.

*DKK: Then it's fine. So one of the many amazing things that you do in *The Politics of the Veil* is to trace back that ethos and history, and do so over and against the history of imperial France, understanding that imperial France is constitutive of modern France—that is to say, this long history of seeing itself as an imperial power and yet wanting to deny its identity as an imperial power. Right?*

JWS: Well, the justification offered for imperial conquest was the civilizing mission. “We’re bringing everybody up to our level, if they can make it!”

(BOTH LAUGH)

*DKK: And it wasn't that I was surprised, but . . . well, maybe I was surprised, because I of course expected gender to be the major concept in the book . . .*

JWS: Right.

*DKK: . . . but your analysis of racism is really the engine, as it were, of the text . . .*

JWS: I think it is.

*DKK: . . . and of the headscarf controversies. I must admit, it was a surprise to me that you could tell this narrative—surprising, perhaps, since Joan Scott is known as . . .*

JWS: Madame Gender!

*DKK: Yes, right!*

(BOTH LAUGH)

*DKK: But then you proceed to make this strong argument about race! And you make the strong argument about race, not as it was articulated in the '90s, in, you know, “the difference debates,” which so often took the form of: “Well, you have to choose to either make an argument for gender or make an argument for race.”*

JWS: And now it's intersectionality, right? Everything intersects with everything else. But, in fact, I think that if you do gender right—that is, if you ask questions about what's going on when you see arguments about male/female/masculine/feminine being made—you see the racism! And I think that, in the veil case, the arguments about gender equality are actually displacements of racist arguments—something you hear from French Republicans. Now, the apologists for this sort of position want to say that it's not about racism at all. But if you read what they say, it's extraordinary, the kind of dismissive, deprecating language that gets used to talk about these others, these immigrants, who are often not even immigrants themselves, but the children of children of children of immigrants—which is to say, who are French by any standard. So I do think that, when you're reading for gender, you can read it as a displacement of other things, just as you can read other things as a displacement of gender. But, more often than not, I think, gender serves as that onto which other things are transposed. Especially in this age when “sexual democracy” is supposedly the name of the game, you can displace all kinds of issues onto the issue of gender equality. So you have Sarkozy saying, “Burkas are not welcome in France, not because we're denying religious conscience, but because they violate the principle of gender equality, which is the primordial principle of the French Republic.” And you think to yourself, “Huh?”

(KIM LAUGHS)

JWS: You know, these guys who can't bear to share power with women in the political realm are now the advocates of an equality that, ten years ago, they were not interested in promoting.

*DKK: Right. So the analysis of race helps to re-animate the urgency of gender.*

JWS: And the questions about gender lead you to insights about race. It's both of those at once, I think.

*DKK: And then the transnational questions, right?*

JWS: Hm.

*DKK: Because, as we were talking about, the post-colony is the primary form of racism that the French are experiencing.*

JWS: Yes. In the French case, that's right.

*DKK: And there's the sense of threat about what can be assimilated and what cannot be assimilated—with the French state having its hand forced, being pressed as to what it is that people are being asked to assimilate to, what the principles at stake here are.*

JWS: And then, of course, assimilation became a bad word. And then integration was the word. But now, of course, that's a bad word as well. What it would take to recognize these others in terms that are acceptable to them—that is really the question. And that's where I think a lot of the political problems arise. You know, where do we draw the line? What is acceptable and not acceptable, and in what terms? I think, for example, that schools—public schools—should not have to teach creationism in the U.S., or, more broadly, Muslim or Christian or any other particular versions of history, or science.

*DKK: What's the alternative there, then?*

JWS: Well, people are arguing that the Muslim kids want to hear their story of it; or, in the United States, it would be creationist science.

*DKK: So, education as mirror.*

JWS: Yes, as a confirmation of one's beliefs and values, and I don't think that should be what education is about. So, there are lines you draw in terms of how you accommodate—and do not accommodate—the sensibilities of minority groups of one kind or another. But that doesn't mean that you can't wear a headscarf to school! Or that their presence pollutes the secular ground of the school and its curriculum. And, in fact, in the early days, in the earliest days of French Republican schools, the whole point of the school was to instill republican principles into these children who were being raised either by superstitious families or by priests. So the point of the school was to create, to transform. Now, you have to come to the school already believing.

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: Or already secular.

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: And that doesn't seem to me to make any sense.

*DKK: So, it's not hard to understand the expectations of and about public secularism in France, in Europe, in the West.*

JWS: Right.

*DKK: On the other hand, it's harder to understand the unrealistic qualities of those expectations. If you just looked at demographics, you would think, "Well, even if your aspiration were to realize some kind of expansive, inclusive secular humanism, you would still have to account for all of these radically different cultures that are shifting and moving across boundaries and so on. And it's not as if Islam were a new phenomenon.*

JWS: That's right.

*DKK: Surely, 9/11 plays into this.*

JWS: But also—to go back to your question of sovereignty—think of the challenge posed to sovereignty, not only by globalization, but in the case of Europe, by Europe itself.

*DKK: Yes, that's right!*

JWS: So, what does it mean to end passport checks at frontiers? To have a passport for Europe, rather than for France or Italy or Greece or Germany or whatever? I think there are ways in which these others compound the anxiety that the undermining of a certain kind of state sovereignty produces.

*DKK: And state identity!*

JWS: And state identity. Holding onto that identity sometimes means an almost reactionary return to notions of what it means to be, say, French or German. It's not only France. It applies to any of these European countries, which are in some way or another looking for ways to assert a national identity.

*DKK: Yes, that's right. And that's where I read the psychoanalytic influences in The Politics of the Veil, especially when you refer to the "phantasm," or the "fantasy," of France. And the ways in which the veil represents a situation involving—I think you use the phrase, "the over-determined symbolism of the veil."*

JWS: Yes.

*DKK: It represents this outsized threat to this fantasy of what it means to be . . .*

JWS: To be French.

*DKK: Yes, to be French. And so, even if you stayed with psychoanalysis for a while . . .*

JWS: I don't think psychoanalysis answers all the questions! (LAUGHS)

*DKK: No, no, I don't think so either. Do you put the state on the couch? There is, of course, the critical quality of psychoanalysis that reveals occluded yet determinant sets of forces, such as the continuously animating myth about what it means to be French, for example.*

JWS: Right.

*DKK: But then there is this other question, namely, what do you do to in response to the crisis posed by what the analysis reveals?*

JWS: You can't put them on the couch! (LAUGHS)

*DKK: No, no, of course you can't!*

JWS: I think of it as a critical-analytic tool—you make use of psychoanalytic insight. So, you could say that the reaction to the veil in the period around 2000, especially before the law was passed, was a form of hysteria.

*DKK: Indeed.*

JWS: It doesn't mean that you either give out psychotropic drugs or call in the psychiatrist to deal with the hysteria!

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: But saying that it's a form of hysteria indicates that there's a reaction that exceeds the practical difficulties. So it's not that the Muslims are going to outbreed the French; it's not that behind every veil there's a terrorist.

*DKK: Although that was part of the anxiety.*

JWS: Yes, that was part of the anxiety. But if you say that this is about worries concerning what can be seen and what can't be seen, and how these divisions operate, you then have a critical lens through which to address the questions. And you can say, furthermore, that these are not issues—that it is a question, rather, of an impoverished population that is being discriminated against. And, when you're thinking about the policy issues, you treat as excessive some of the claims that are being made, and you look for other ways to address the problem, for more socially grounded responses. For instance, if kids are burning cars in the suburbs, and someone gets on the radio and says that it's because the imams are telling them to, you can say: "Okay, this is a kind of phantasmatic conflation, a collapsing of the fear of Islam and terrorism and the fact that these kids are Arabs. And not even, probably, all of them are Muslims, but many of them are Arabs." So, how do you address these questions? You address the questions by refusing the phantasmatic associations, and you look to defuse them. Which is not to say that "reality" can ever control fantasy, but it gives you a sense of what the practical considerations need to be and which are those that are actually just inflaming the debate. I don't think that the psychoanalytic approach gives you policy prescriptions, however. What it does is identify how the issues are being formulated, and it gives you some sort of window or way into thinking about how you can address them.

*DKK: That's right. I think you used this language in the book, where the task is uncovering those fantasies.*

JWS: Absolutely! It's that they are making people hysterical!

*DKK: They're making people hysterical. Right. In the book you discuss the veil controversy in regard to French cultures and policies that uphold laïcité, and so on and so forth. But I'm curious about how you would situate the analysis of secularism that you develop in the book to some of the dominant discourses about secularism that you hear outside of France, in other contexts.*

JWS: That's an interesting question. Well, I think the French case is one in which you get a kind of extreme form of secularism. You get a sort of fundamentalist secularism, which is not the case everywhere. And one of the things I try to do in the book is show that, historically, the process of secularization was much more complicated than the proponents of a hard line on laïcité would have you believe. It has not been a primordial value since the French Revolution. Instead, it wasn't until 1905 that a law separated church and state. And even then, the process by which secularization proceeds always has to do with some accommodations of the dominant religious population.

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: Consider Catholicism's influence. So, for the holidays, for example, you still get days off for Assumption and Ascension. The point is that it's not just Christian holidays, but specifically Catholic holidays. And there are all sorts of ways in which the traces of Catholic culture are still evident in the official French observance of things. They may be unmarked as religious in this secular society, but they're there. So, one of the things I tried to do in the book is to say that these hard-line claims are belied by the history.

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: The second thing is that there are different histories in different places. And so it's no accident, it seems to me, that in Germany, where there's still religious teaching and a generally religious influence in the schools, people are not arguing that the reason people can or cannot wear headscarves has to do with secularism! It's certainly not the same kind of secularism that the French are invoking.

*DKK: So, you and I are here at ASU for a conference on gender and secularism, and we've talked a lot these past days about the multiple forms of secularism. A question that kept coming back to me during our discussions is that of the usefulness of the category—that is, whether the category of secularism is still useful.*

JWS: Well . . . (LAUGHS)

*DKK: There has been an exhaustion of the category, right? And so I want to ask you about the exhaustion of the category, on the one hand, but also about how you have found it, as a critical historian, to now be thinking, writing, talking about religion.*

JWS: Well, if you had told me ten years ago that I would be coming to questions about religion, I would not have believed it. And it certainly has to do with *The Politics of the Veil*. Until I actually took up that set of issues, religion was not, let's say, on my horizon. And one of the things I discovered as I started to do work on secularism was that some of the most interesting work being done comes from people in religious studies.

*DKK: Who are you thinking of?*

JWS: Well, someone like Tomoko Masuzawa, or Kathleen Davis.

*DKK: Sure.*

JWS: Who else? Now I'm not going to be able to produce their names! But those two are good examples, good enough to start with at least. And you can't enter this terrain of the secular without looking at its other side, the religious. There was an article by Gil Anidjar at Columbia, the one in which he writes about Said and *Orientalism*, which I also thought was really interesting. He's trying to argue that Orientalism is a form of secularism, taking Said farther than Said went. So when I finished *The Politics of the Veil*, I thought, "Okay, what next? I can't stop thinking about secularism!"

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: Because it's too interesting a set of questions not to take up. Also, I always thought of myself as secular. I grew up in a family in which my mother's parents were Orthodox Jews, and my father's parents were Jews, but not practicing in any way at all—in which religion certainly had to be respected, because of this one set of grandparents, but wasn't a preoccupation or a practice in any way. My parents weren't agnostic—they were atheists!

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: And adamant about it. And I certainly grew up with those same feelings. It was the question of anti-racism in relation to the treatment of Muslims that pulled me into the question of secularism and religion in ways that no other set of confrontations, I think, had done before.

*DKK: So, it sounds to me like the debates around secularism have served as, in a manner of speaking, a kind of synthesizing vehicle for you, much in the ways that gender did earlier.*

JWS: Yes, I think that's right. And it was interest in the way the French were using *laïcité* to mask or displace certain kinds of racist attitudes that led me to think about secularism more generally; but it was through the preoccupation with the political and racist deployments of these things that I came to be interested in these questions. Which then led me to the deconstruction of the secular, but that of course involves the construction of the religious—so that then becomes a really interesting problematic.

*DKK: So is that the next step, then? The next question? You know, I think about the racialization of religion, and I think about the secularization of race . . .*

JWS: Right!

(BOTH LAUGH)

*DKK: Which is to say, about all of these permutations, in which you can't just disaggregate and dissociate the variables and factors, but you have to try to figure out, as we said earlier, the right questions to ask.*

JWS: I don't see questions about secularism replacing questions about gender, but, in fact, as at this conference, bringing them together.

*DKK: Right.*

JWS: And it seems to me that the kind of work I've done about gender continues to serve me in relation to secularism. It's no accident that the problem I'm interested in, or the sort of provocation that I want to produce, is one that says, the easy association of secularism, or processes of secularization, with the inevitable emancipation of women has to be interrogated. It's at that place that the questions become really interesting to me. And then, of course: To what extent are secular societies better for women than religious societies? Is this true across the board? Can you even make those kinds of contrasts without doing a much more nuanced and complicated historical investigation?

*DKK: Absolutely. I must say, it's remarkable how you resist easy ideological positions in the text. You know, for a relatively short text, you pack in quite a bit. I mean, I could imagine this having been a thousand-page book.*

JWS: Well, I am incapable of writing a book that's more than about two hundred pages.

(BOTH LAUGH)

JWS: I've never written a really fat book. Never.

*DKK: But what I like about it is its synecdochical quality. It's not about size, but it's certainly a "Big Book" nonetheless.*

JWS: Right.

*DKK: "The Big Book" is the distillation of big problems and big ideas, in, as we were saying earlier, concise, clear language, explanation, argumentation, and communication. So maybe the place to end here is to ask you just a little bit about the secularism seminar you are convening next year. Is that right?*

JWS: Yes, next year at the Institute.

*DKK: What will you do?*

JWS: Well, the people who are coming work in fields that I don't particularly work in. They are people who have thought a lot more about these questions than I have, so I think of it as a time to learn a lot. I will bring the gender focus. I mean, there are other people who work on this too, but my particular preoccupation will continue to be with the gender issues. So, for me, it's the beginning of a big project, and I don't know exactly where it's going to go. But I figure that convening this seminar is a way of thinking through a set of issues, some of which I haven't even begun to imagine, with a group of people who will teach each other and push each other on a whole array of questions, which is, when these seminars operate at their best, how they work.

*DKK: It sounds very exciting.*

JWS: Yes, yes.

*DKK: Joan, I want to thank you for taking this time.*

JWS: Well, thank you! This is really fun.

*DKK: Yes, absolutely!*

JWS: I just have one thing to say.

*DKK: Sure thing.*

JWS: When you asked me about the lack of ideological posturing in my work—it's one of the things that came from growing up in the family that I did. I became allergic to hard ideological positions, or at least wary of them.

*DKK: But don't you think that the suspicion of ideological positions makes you a better critical thinker?*

JWS: Absolutely. That's what critique is about. It's interrogating even those assumptions you think are the most sure in your own arsenal of thinking.

*DKK: Which is also, to me, about courage.*

JWS: Well, that's really a nice way of putting it.

*DKK: I absolutely believe that! I've said this in talks and such—that it takes an enormous amount of courage, not simply to be critical, but to engage in deep and consistent critique.*

JWS: Yes. It's hard work and it doesn't make you lots of friends. Even in your own camps, it doesn't make you a lot of friends.

*DKK: Indeed.*