Joan Wallach Scott. *Sex and Secularism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. ISBN 9780691160641.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel started her recent address to the Bundestag after the protracted process of forming a government by addressing the controversial issue of immigration. She noted that while Germany has been “historically formed by Christianity and Judaism” it is also the case that “with 4.5 million Muslims living with us, their religion, Islam, has also become a part of Germany” ([Chase 2018](https://www.dw.com/en/angela-merkel-stresses-migrants-islam-in-first-bundestag-address-of-new-government/a-43065114)). By contrast, United States President Donald Trump called for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” and his travel ban, slightly modified, has now been ratified by the U.S. Supreme Court (Liptak and Shear 2018).

These two contrasting responses capture something of what is at stake in Joan Wallach Scott’s reading of secularism as “a polemical term whose meaning changes in the different contexts in which it is deployed” (179). Scott urges us to consider not only what secularism has always meant, but the work enabled by appeals to secularism. Her analysis could not be more timely, for it sharply focuses attention on the effects of secularist discourses. As we see from Trump’s extreme actions, as well as from the first fining of a Muslim woman for wearing a niqab in a small town in Denmark, “the language of sexual emancipation and gender equality,” portrayed as the essence of secularism, is being deployed “to dismiss Muslim claims for recognition as full members of the nation-states of western Europe” (178). This, Scott argues, is not only significant in relation to Islamophobia. It is equally important where emancipation and equality are treated as synonymous “expressions of a universal and reified sexual desire,” no different from formal political equality (175). Returning to Marx, Scott’s analysis makes visible the fact that treating emancipation and equality as synonymous in this manner, turns them into “instruments for the perpetuation of the subordination and inequality of women in the West, as well as of disadvantaged minority populations—in this instance Muslims—and for their continued marginalization in the secular and Christian democracies of the West” (179).

Scott’s text traces the historical conditions associated with the discursive operations of secularism and its relation to the binaries of public:private, political:domestic and reason:passion. She builds on this to challenge contemporary discourses that equate secularism with gender equality and serve to mask inequalities that “extend beyond gender to race, class, ethnicity and religion” (183). Her incisive analysis is executed with a clarity that cuts through obfuscations of complexity so often characterizing academic genealogies of secularism.

*Sex and Secularism* is a clarion call to continuing critique of our present, or, in Scott’s words, to thinking differently about “the difficulties we face in acting to realize more just and egalitarian futures” (183). A further series of questions arise from this analysis. Scott’s analysis of secularism is grounded in an insistence on understanding it historically; its meaning and import is contextually dependent. As Scott points out, this analysis is equally applicable to our accounts of race and ethnicity. If we are to challenge the inequalities that extend beyond gender to race, ethnicity and religion, and indeed class, then we need to approach these questions through a similar analytical lens. Insisting on the historicity of race and ethnicity also means that we need to develop an analytics of embodiment, investigating the relation between practices of embodiment and historically specific relations of inequality, and specifically gender inequality. A whole new strand of feminist analysis that engages with embodiment is relevant here, ranging from Saba Mahmood’s analysis of the politics of piety and its relation to wider political imaginaries and accounts of feminist agency, to the works of emerging feminist scholars such as Emily Beausoleil and Dana Mills.

The volume is published in a series Public Square that seeks to bring significant issues of the day to our attention. Scott’s work eloquently succeeds in bringing complex debates to a wider audience, whilst simultaneously uncovering genealogies that will shape academic debate today and into the future.

*Aletta J. Norval*

*Anglia Ruskin University*

*aletta.norval@anglia.ac.uk*

**Notes on Contributor**

Aletta J. Norval is a political theorist working on democratic theory, in particular the mechanisms of democratic subject formation. Her most recent monograph is *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition* (Cambridge University Press). She is currently Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Anglia Ruskin University, UK.

**References**

Beausoleil, EJ. (2015). Embodying an ethics of response-ability. *Borderlands e-Journal: New Spaces in the Humanities*. 14(2), 1-16

Chase, Jefferson. 2018. “Angela Merkel stresses migrants, Islam in first Bundestag address of new government,” *DW Germany*, March 3, <https://www.dw.com/en/angela-merkel-stresses-migrants-islam-in-first-bundestag-address-of-new-government/a-43065114>.

Liptak, Adam and Michael D. Shear. 2018. “Trump’s Travel Ban Is Upheld by Supreme Court,” *New York Times*, June 26, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/26/us/politics/supreme-court-trump-travel-ban.html>.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

Mills, Dana. 2017. *Dance and Politics.* Manchester University Press, Manchester.