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SEX, SECULARISM, AND “FEMONATIONALISM”

“Strange bedfellows” and the reproduction of civilization

by Sarah Bracke

June 14, 2018



In her 2001 International Women’s Day speech, the editor in chief of the Dutch feminist glossy magazine *Opzij*, Cisca Dresselhuys, declared she would never hire a journalist who wears a headscarf. A year later, weeks prior to the national elections, Dresselhuys dedicated the magazine’s editorial and portrait sections to the staunch Islamophobe and right-wing nationalist Pim Fortuyn, casting the openly gay politician as a potential feminist ally. At the time this *rapprochement* between seemingly strange bedfellows was cause for bewilderment (although, given the long entanglement of feminism and civilizational politics, not everyone was surprised). Since then, however, with the recent upsurge of civilizational politics, such deployments of feminism have become all too common.

They have also increasingly become the object of scholarly inquiry, and the two books this forum brings together offer major contributions to this field of study. While the theoretical engagements and arguments both books provide are not limited to the question of women’s

rights and feminism in relation to civilizational politics, this question provides a critical terrain where the books resonate and speak to each other, and where each book breaks new ground in its own way.

At the heart of *In the Name of Women's Rights* lies an astute observation that firmly centers civilizational politics in political economy. On the one hand, contemporary civilizational discourses put pressure on Muslim and non-Western migrant women “to be emancipated,” Sara Farris argues. Yet at the same time, in systematic and forceful ways, Muslim women are directed toward domestic work, which is precisely the labor that has been analyzed and denounced as reproducing gender inequality. This contradiction reveals how visions and policies of civic integration, in which emancipation is used as a measuring stick for Muslim and non-Western migrants, hinge upon the new political economy that emerged as white, native women in Europe massively entered the sphere of production without a significant redistribution of social reproductive labor across existing gender lines. The result is that brown and migrant women—but also men—increasingly take up the reproductive labor that white working women have ceased to do. In tracking this phenomenon, Farris combines an analysis of the rhetoric of women’s emancipation within contemporary civilizational politics with an analysis of the international division of productive and reproductive labor, or what Nancy Fraser calls the global and systemic “crisis of care.” This is one of the great merits of the book.

Since Farris foregrounds the question of reproduction—this is the case, in different ways, in both books—I want to focus on how to think about the making and re-making of civilizational discourses. Farris’s analysis privileges the realm of political economy as the site *par excellence* of the reproduction of civilization. This generates pertinent insights but also raises questions, most notably of whether this point of departure can account not only for the operations of secularism and religion, but also for those of gender and race, in a way that transcends the functionalist approach to civilizational discourses usually deployed by analysts who privilege political economy.

For instance, I am not convinced by the concoction “Muslim and non-EU/non-Western immigrant women,” nor by the idea of Muslim women as a synecdoche for all these female “others,” since this flattens critical differences between religion, race, and migration as social realities and analytical categories. There are specific, historical reasons why Muslims are targeted by current civilizational discourses—reasons that differ from the (often equally problematic) ways in which “non-European migrant women” figure in the symbolic and material realities of contemporary Europe. These differences matter. Admittedly, Farris’s analysis does not aim to develop an analytical take on religion. Yet, at the same time, references

to Islam lie at the heart of the concept of femonationalism. This, I believe, begs conceptual as well as epistemic questions about how the religious, and also the civilizational, dimension is cast.

These comments risk situating me in a place I had really wanted to avoid: namely, the critique that in centering analysis in political economy risks flattening the analytical purchase of categories like gender and race, religion and secularism. Yet, putting it in those terms reminds me that such a juxtaposition between political economy and those other categories is itself in need of unpacking. Political economy should be rethought in such a way that some crucial social relations of power, like gender and race, but also secular governmentality and religion, are not understood as marginal, or superstructural, to the realm of political economy (often understood as structured by social relations of class). My question is not only about what civilizational discourses are made of and how they are reproduced, but also about how to rethink political economy to not only center it in social relations of class but equally in those of gender and race. And, to inquire how they are shaped by secular governmentality and religion.

In *Sex and Secularism*, Joan Scott approaches this question through a focus on secularism. Scott offers a sharp investigation of what (the discourse of) secularism is made of, and a compelling critique of the longstanding assumption that secularism is liberating and guarantees (women’s) emancipation. Her focus on secularism proves an effective way into the thick tapestry of “civilization” in which various threads of Christianity, gender, nationalism, race, and colonialism are woven together. The result is an analytically rich account of what civilization is, and, indeed, of its reproduction. The question of sexual difference is crucial here: Scott persuasively argues that secularism implies the naturalization of sexual difference, notably in the (secular) notion of the complementarity of the sexes and a corresponding focus on marriage, connected to biology and evolution, and inscribed with notions of progress and civilization. This naturalization is integral to the processes of race-making and establishing Europe’s outsiders, Scott suggests. Thus, racialized sexual difference is a structural dimension of secular modernity and its capitalist economy; it is at the heart of the regulation and reproduction of the identities of Western European nation states.

Scott’s analysis demonstrates that the making and reproduction of civilization cannot be bound by an analysis centered on class relations. Rather, civilization is equally structured by race and gender, or what Scott calls racialized sexual difference. Secularism and religion play pivotal roles in constructions of both race and sexual difference. Using Scott’s framework to reconsider femonationalism, I would have liked to read more about what race is and does—and does differently in various national contexts—in the production of gender and sexual difference in

general, and indeed specifically in the production of the classed women in Farris’s analysis. Scott also suggests that we look more carefully at what happens with gender in the equation. Indeed, given how central reproductive work has been in the construction of gender under capitalism, surely the structural reshuffling, as well as crisis, of the division of labor between productive and reproductive labor has major implications for our understanding and conceptualization of gender. In other words, rather than “double standards” (about women’s emancipation, for instance) that would apply to one single category of women, we are dealing with new and differentiated ways of gendering.

Some of what I mean can be traced in the vignette with which I opened. Tellingly, even as Dresselhuys was vocal about not hiring a journalist in hijab—a position generally picked up as “women with a headscarf are not welcome at the feminist magazine *Opzij*”—hijabi women were keeping the *Opzij* offices clean. Dresselhuys’s assertion rested on a categorical distinction: journalists and cleaning ladies simply did not belong to a singular category of woman in her imaginary. Accounting for the differentiated ways of gendering in this case requires analyses in terms of class, race, and religion, where all of these categories are pursued in depth and in their entanglement.

In light of how I posed the problem above, I would argue that *Sex and Secularism* effectively opens up and rethinks the realm of political economy. And perhaps it does so more than it acknowledges. At the outset of Scott’s analysis lies a deliberate decision to turn away from secularism as a category of analysis, which would seek to define secularism through a set of characteristics. Instead, she considers secularism as a discursive operation of power, that is to say, as a discourse. It seems to me, however, that secularism is and does more than as a discourse in Scott’s analysis, and might more adequately be described as a form of governmentality, that is to say, the ensemble of organized mentalities, rationalities, and techniques through which modern citizens are governed. Or perhaps it is the other way around, and it might be fruitful for scholars of gender, race, and religion to explore more in depth how Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of governmentality is, to a large extent, a theoretical account of the birth of secularity in western Europe.

Much conceptual work still needs to be done to fully appraise the relation between governmentality and the secular, but the work of Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, which inspire Scott’s take on secularism, provide excellent companionship along the way. Some of the rewards of that conceptual labor are already tangible. As I just suggested, this would be one way to take on board, albeit it in a different configuration, the political economy dimension for which Farris indeed makes a convincing case.

Moreover, thinking governmentality in terms of the secular, and vice versa, would enable us to distinguish different forms of governmentality when it comes to the secular—such as differences between French *laïcité*, which both Farris and Scott discuss, and Dutch pillarization, which Farris discusses.

And last, but not least, given the conceptual connections between governmentality on the one hand, and biopolitics as population control on the other, the question of reproduction would surely remain centerstage. As civilizational discourse is on the rise, questions concerning its substance, its matter, its making, and its reproduction are urgent ones to consider and conceptualize. *In the Name of Women’s Rights* and *Sex and Secularism* are consequential contributions to this task and will no doubt inform and feed our discussions for a long time.

TAGGED IN

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