

Beyond the Veil

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*THE POLITICS OF THE VEIL

By Joan Wallach Scott.

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A kind of aggression.” “A successor to the Berlin Wall.” “A lever in the long power struggle between democratic values and fundamentalism.” “An insult to education.” “A terrorist operation.” These descriptions—by former French President Jacques Chirac; economist Jacques Attali; and philosophers Bernard-Henri Levy, Alain Finkielkraut and Andre Glucks-mann—do not refer to the next great menace to human civilization but rather to the Muslim woman’s headscarf, which covers the hair and neck, or, as it is known in France, the *foulard islamique*.

In her keenly observed book **The Politics of the Veil*, historian Joan Wallach Scott examines the particular French obsession with the *foulard*, which culminated in March 2004 with the adoption of a law that made it illegal for students to display any “conspicuous signs” of religious affiliation. The law further specified that the Muslim headscarf, the Jewish skullcap and large crosses were not to be worn but that “medallions, small crosses, stars of David, hands of Fatima, and small Korans” were permitted. Despite the multireligious contortions, it was very clear, of course, that the law was primarily aimed at Muslim schoolgirls.

The decade-long debate in France over the *foulard* was marked by three specific controversies. The first erupted in October 1989, when Ernest Cheniere, the principal of a high school in Creil, north of Paris, expelled three students: Samira Saidani and Leila and Fatima Achaboun. The reason for the expulsion, Cheniere claimed, was that he had to enforce *laicite*, the French notion of secularism, in the school. The national debate that followed took place within the context of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie and the West’s confrontation with Iran, on the one hand, and the celebration of the bicente-nnial of the French Republic, on the other.

At the time that France’s attention was focused on three teenage girls with head-scarves, the country had more than 3 million Muslims. French-Algerian novelist Leila Sebbar, writing in *Le Monde*, qualified the controversy as “grotesque.” In the end, the Socialist Lionel Jospin, who at that time was minister of education, chose to let the courts decide the case. The Conseil d’Etat eventually ruled that students could not be refused admission simply for wearing head-scarves, but it also gave teachers and principals the power to decide, on a case-by-case basis, whether such signs of religious affiliation were permissible.

The second *foulard* controversy ignited in 1994 with the same Ernest Cheniere. He was no longer a high school principal, having capitalized on his earlier fame and won a Parliament seat as a deputy for the center-right party *Rassemblement pour la Republique*, representing the department of Oise. In this new capacity, he sponsored a bill to ban all “ostentatious” signs of religious affiliations in schools. The same arguments were offered up as in 1989, but the

political context this time was supplied by the civil war in Algeria. For Cheniere and his large and diverse number of supporters, the fight against Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria and elsewhere mandated a strengthening of the secularist state at home.

The third and most recent *foulard* controversy occurred in 2003, when two teenage sisters, Alma and Lila Levy, were expelled from their high school in the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers for refusing to take off their headscarves. The Levy sisters are the daughters of a lawyer who considers himself “a Jew without God” and a Kabyle teacher who had been baptized a Catholic during the Algerian war. The girls had converted to Islam after their parents’ separation and had donned the scarves as part of that process. In an interview with *Le Monde*, the girls’ father declared, “I am not in favor of the headscarf; but I defend the right of my children to go to school. In the course of this business I’ve discovered the hysterical madness of certain ayatollahs of secularism who have lost all their common sense.”

That year, a commission led by former government minister Bernard Stasi, which had been formed to study the feasibility of a law on religious displays, held interviews with various specialists. It later issued a report that reaffirmed the importance of secularism to the Republic and suggested a law on “conspicuous” religious signs but also made some recommendations to acknowledge the plurality of religions in France. (For example, the commission suggested the recognition of Yom Kippur and Eid-al-Adha as national holidays.) The sole recommendation that Jacques Chirac took from the Stasi commission was the law banning the headscarf. Wallach Scott writes :

There was to be no room for the compromises that had been negotiated in years past (scarves on shoulders, “lite” scarves, bandanas); the law was designed to dispel the tensions these compromises had embodied. It became the law of the land in March 2004, and its enforcement began the following October. Without the softening effect of the other recommendations, the headscarf ban became a definitive pronouncement: there would no longer be compromises or mediation—it was either Islam or the republic.

In order to understand how a small piece of cloth became a national obsession (compared, by philosophers no less, to terrorism), one must go back quite a few years in French history, to the era that current French President Nicolas Sarkozy recently told his compatriots they must stop repenting for: colonization. Indeed, Wallach Scott argues, it is impossible to understand modern-day attitudes in France toward the foulard without delving into the history of racism in that country, because the headscarf has played a “significant part as a continuing sign of the irreducible difference between Islam and France” and is perceived to express “not only religious incompatibilities but also ethnic/cultural ones.”

When the French government invaded Algeria, in 1830, it started a vast campaign of military “pacification,” which was quickly followed by the imposition of French laws deemed necessary for the civilizing mission to succeed. Women were crucial to that enterprise. In articles, stories and novels of the day, Algerian women were universally depicted as oppressed, and so in order for civilization truly to penetrate Algeria, the argument went, the women had to cast off their veils. General Bugeaud, who was charged with administering the territory in the

1840s, declared, “The Arabs elude us because they conceal their women from our gaze.” Algerian men, meanwhile, were perceived to be sexual predators who could not control their urges unless their womenfolk were draped in veils. Colonization would solve this by bringing the light of European civilization to Arab males, who, after a few generations of French rule, would learn to control their urges. The governor-general of Algeria remarked in 1898 that “the Arab man’s, the native Jew’s and the Arab woman’s physiology, as well as tolerance for pederasty, and typically oriental ways of procreating and relating to one another are so different from the European man’s that it is necessary to take appropriate measures.” As late as 1958, French wives of military officers, desperate to stop support for the FLN, which spearheaded the war of liberation against France, staged a symbolic “unveiling” of Algerian women at a pro-France rally in the capital of Algiers.

Decades later, millions of French citizens with ancestral roots in North Africa are being told much the same thing: in order to be French, they must “integrate” by giving up that which makes them different—Islam. The religion, however, is not regarded as a set of beliefs that adherents can adjust to suit the demands of their everyday lives but rather as an innate and unbridgeable attribute. It is easy to see how racism can take hold in such a context. During the foulard controversies, it did not appear to matter that 95 percent of French Muslims do not attend mosque, that more than 80 percent of Muslim women in France do not wear the headscarf or even that the number of schoolgirls in headscarves has never been more than a few hundred. The racist notion of innate differences between French citizens of North African origin and those of European origin defined the debate. For instance, the Levy sisters were sometimes referred to in the press as Alma and Lila Levy-Omari, thus making their ancestral link to North Africa (on their mother’s side) clearer to the reader.

If racism has been the subtext of the *foulard* controversy in France, Wallach Scott argues, then *laïcité* was its expression. Those who supported the ban on headscarves argued that *laïcité* was not simply secularism but a universal notion that was also unique to France. They called it *une singularité française*. Upon closer scrutiny, however, this particular notion seemed to be quite accommodating to Catholics and rather intransigent to others. For instance, the 1905 law that separated church and state allowed students to have Sundays off to attend church and gave them an additional weekday for religious instruction in the church. The French government currently contributes 10 percent of the budgets of private Christian schools. The school calendar observes Catholic holidays only. Still, despite the discrepancies with which *laïcité* is applied in schools, those who opposed the *foulard* fervently claimed their attachment to *laïcité* and its necessity for the survival of the Republic. *Laïcité* was what made France unique. Therefore, to support the freedom of girls to dress as they please could only mean being an apologist for the oppression of women and an enemy of *laïcité*, and to uphold *laïcité* meant being in favor of a ban on the *foulard*.

At the height of the controversy, everyone seemed to have an opinion about the law. More than sixty public personalities—including actresses Emmanuelle Béart and Isabelle Adjani, philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, former government ministers Corinne Lepage and Yvette Roudy, and activist Fadela Amara—

appealed to Chirac in the pages of Elk magazine to pass a law banning the *foulard*. Few voices were heard in defense of both *laïcité* and Muslim girls' civil right to attend school. Among these were comic book artist Marjane Satrapi, who wrote in the *Guardian* that to forbid schoolgirls to wear the veil was as repressive as forcing them to wear it, and philosopher Pierre Tevanian, who argued that *laïcité* applied to institutions, not people.

In *The Politics of the Veil*, Wallach Scott does a good job of conveying the hysteria that surrounded the foulard debate in France, although the book could have used some copy-editing. For instance, Ernest Cheniere, the high school principal who started the 1989 controversy, gets rebaptized, becoming Eugene Che-niere. In addition, Wallach Scott neglects to mention an important postscript to the *affaires des foulards*: the kidnapping, in August 2004, of French journalists Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot by an obscure Islamist group in Iraq, and the group's demand that the law be repealed. (French citizens, Muslim and otherwise, rejected the intrusion into their internal affairs) But Wallach Scott's broad and exhaustive research makes for a bracing account of the debate.

Aside from prevalent racism and a rigid understanding of *laïcité*, a third reason for the focus on the *foulard* is a narrow conception of individualism. Wallach Scott demonstrates that French Muslim girls, who were primarily affected by the law on the foulard, were "strikingly absent from the debates." The Stasi commission interviewed just a few girls, and in private sessions only, so that their voices and opinions were never part of the larger public discussion. While acknowledging that some girls may have worn die foulard for reasons other than pressure by fathers or brothers, commentators viewed it simply as a symbol of "the alienation of women." However much the girls or opponents of the law insisted that the foulard was "an expression of individual conviction," the state and supporters of the law declared that "this could not logically be the case," because the headscarf could only mean "an abandonment of individuality and a declaration of one's primary allegiance to communal standards and obligations." In order to be truly French, therefore, Muslim girls had to renounce the foulard, since in this view it was a signal that they were neither loyal to France nor individuals capable of free thought.

The last, and perhaps most disturbing, reason for the focus on the foulard is its sexual connotation. Commentators often contrasted Islamic tradition, which advocates the headscarf as a means of curbing women's "dangerous sexuality," and French culture, which "celebrates sex and sexuality as free of social and political risk." In reality, both Islamic Sharia and strict French *laïcité* produced gender systems that essentially deprived women of the right to dispose of their bodies as they wished. Indeed, in Islamic tradition, women are urged to be modest and to steer clear of *tabarruj*. This Arabic noun has its roots in the verb *baraja*, which means "to display" or "to show off," and the noun can be translated as something like "affectation." In *A Season in Mecca*, his narrative book about the pilgrimage, Moroccan anthropologist Abdellah Hammoudi uses the term "ostentation" to translate *tabarruj*, "the invariable term for a bearing that is deemed immodest or conspicuous, a hieratic stance." Similarly, the French law born out of strict definitions of *laïcité* warned schoolgirls about displaying

“conspicuous” signs of religious affiliation. In short, the battle between the two modes of thinking was played out in women’s bodies.

The sexual argument against the *foulard* was common in France in 2003, although by that point the word “*foulard*” had all but disappeared from public discourse and was replaced by *voile*, or veil, which covers the entire face except for the eyes. This was erroneous but not entirely innocent, of course, because it made it possible for commentators to talk in terms of more general stereotypes of Muslim women in places like Yemen, where the veil is prevalent, rather than the reality of suburban Paris, where it is not. More recently, in an interview with a London-based newspaper, Bernard-Henri Levy went as far as to say that “the veil is an invitation to rape.” It is perverse to suggest that a woman is inviting rape by the way she dresses, but such is the extreme that Levy will go to in order to preserve the idea of a homogeneous female European identity. In this view, a European woman is uncovered, and that signifies both her availability to the male gaze as well as her liberation.

It is interesting, too, that Levy demands for himself that which he is not willing to give others. In 2004 he hired the designer Andree Putman to renovate his vacation home in Tangier. The home lies next to the famous Cafe Hafa, whose regulars once included Paul Bowles, Tennessee Williams and Jean Genet, and which has unparalleled views of the Mediterranean. Patrons of the cafe can no longer enjoy an unobstructed view, however, because during the renovations Levy constructed a wall around his terrace, where his wife, the actress and singer Arielle Dombasle, likes to sunbathe. Levy reportedly wanted to protect her from the eyes of the men at the Cafe Hafa. Unveiling only goes one way, it seems.

There is in France today a pervading hypocrisy that invokes freedom of expression when cartoonists from Charlie Hebdo or France Soir offend Muslim sensibilities but remains stubbornly quiet when a Muslim woman’s right to dispose of her body as she wishes is denied. This is the same hypocrisy that calls soccer star Zinedine Zidane a French citizen without any qualifications but refers to Zacarias Moussaoui as a French citizen of Moroccan origin. It is the same hypocrisy that organizes support committees for teachers in Flers who refuse to teach girls wearing the *foulard* but does not appear to care that 40 percent of French youths living in the largely impoverished and North African banlieues are unemployed. It is the same hypocrisy that celebrates the work of North African soldiers in the fight against the Nazis in World War II but until last year refused them the same army pensions as their French counterparts. It is the same hypocrisy that condemns humorist Dieudonne for his abhorrently racist remarks on Jews but condones former *Le Point* editor Claude Imbert when he says, “I am something of an Islamophobe and I’m not embarrassed to say so.”

It is the same hypocrisy, finally, that expends boundless intellectual energy and enormous state resources on a small number of schoolgirls in headscarves but does next to nothing to ensure that these schoolgirls—most of whom are stuck in low-performing high schools designated as ZEPs (or zones d’éducation prioritaires)—gain access to the same educational and employment opportunities as their white compatriots. In the end, the successive controversies in France have served as fantastic distractions from real problems and have provided comfort and support to Islamic fundamentalists, who recruit Muslim youngsters

by telling them that France does not want them. The foulard in France, therefore, is nothing more than a fig leaf; however long one stares at it, the eye will eventually have to face the nakedness of racism and discrimination.

To paraphrase another French philosopher: I do not approve of the headscarf, but I will defend to the death the right of women to wear it. □

[Source : The Nation]