

# Psycho-History

THEO FINIGAN

Joan Wallach Scott. *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Duke University Press, 2011. 187pp.

In *The Fantasy of Feminist History* an eminent cultural and gender historian interrogates some of the basic methodological and epistemological assumptions that constitute her discipline. While affirming history's continued intellectual relevance—it is historians who, crucially, “introduce the difference of time” into interdisciplinary theoretical discourse, for instance (42)—Joan Wallach Scott nonetheless seeks here to problematize, if not transform, many of the fundamental aspects of her field. From the perspective of a scholar steeped in a wide variety of intellectual currents, including feminist theory, gender studies, and poststructuralism, conventional or mainstream history simultaneously appears too dry and retains too many problematic ideological blind spots (particularly when it comes to women's history) to be practiced in a “business-as-usual” fashion. In broad terms, then, this book articulates a “critique of history's disciplinary assumptions” in order, Scott avers, to produce a “beneficial ‘vertigo’” that will lead, the author hopes, to “the writing of a different kind of history” (3-4). In her formulation of what we might call a *history of difference*—a discourse defined by its revisionist focus on examining previously marginalized individuals and social groups, its linguistic and methodological self-consciousness, its disruption of key disciplinary concepts such as the agential subject and teleological master-narrative, its refusal of epistemological closure or scholarly certainty, and its linking of scholarship with politicized critique—Scott inhabits the same general terrain as certain “postmodern” historians who have, over the past several decades, sought to leaven what they perceive to be a stubbornly conservative discipline with the fruitful insights of critical theory (scholars such as F.R. Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins, Dominick LaCapra, Alan Munslow, Hélène Bowen Raddeker, Beverley Southgate, and Hayden White come to mind here).

Scott's specific emphasis in this book is on applying terminology drawn from psychoanalytic theory—particularly from the work of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek—to writing and thinking about history. As such, concepts such as fantasy, castration, and sexual difference are used by Scott in order to explore the ways in which the putative “social fact[s]” that history tends to be concerned with explaining can be understood not only in terms of their concrete or objective occurrence, but also according to their “unconscious dimension” and in relation to the “operations of fantasies” that

are finally irreducible to the realm of determinate knowledge (19). Indeed, for Scott, it is precisely the conundrums inherent in sexual difference and gender identity, including the absence of any “necessary correspondence between the anatomy of men and women and the psychic positions of masculinity and femininity,” that “make history” in the first instance (17). From this perspective, the focus of feminist historians shifts away from, say, the recovery of occluded female subjects and their material “experience” (the object of Scott’s critique in her seminal 1991 essay “The Evidence of Experience”); this latter approach becomes untenable, for Scott, since it presumes the stability and knowability of the subject that psychoanalysis—in its emphasis on sexed identity as an “unsolvable riddle” (17) that imbricates the psychic and social, the natural and cultural, and the material and discursive in an endless circulation of energies—fundamentally puts in question. Instead, Scott argues for a broad shift in emphasis in history away from *the subject* as such toward “the means and effects of ... subject production as it has varied over time” (40). Scott’s psychoanalytically-inflected critique of historiography thus centres around the questions of “how, under what conditions, and with what fantasies the identities of men and women—which so many historians take to be self-evident—are articulated and recognized” (21).

Each of the seven chapters in this book—three of which are reprints of essays previously published elsewhere—takes up an aspect of the complex relation between gender and the production of subjectivity with respect to the disciplinary history of feminist thought in general and women’s history in France in particular (*history*, for Scott, names both events in “the past” and a discipline that produces knowledge in written form about those events). In the introduction, Scott clearly establishes the theoretical framework that undergirds the subsequent essays. Drawing on an impressive array of thinkers on a number of distinct but intersecting topics, including historiography, gender, identity, causality, and constructivism, Scott demonstrates lucidly how critical and psychoanalytic theory may productively be deployed in the service of what she terms a “critical reading practice for history” (4).

The book’s first chapter combines a narrative about the emergence of feminist history in the early 1970s with reflections on its contemporary disciplinary location and future directions. If many—though, crucially, not all—of the goals of early feminist historians have been attained (women have been “[introduced] into the picture” as subjects of mainstream history, while an “enormous written corpus” has been produced by women historians [24]), Scott wonders if a high price has been paid for the attainment of institutional legitimacy, by a concomitant blunting of insurgent energies. Interrogating the “melancholy” of an earlier generation of feminist scholars for a passionate, affective engagement with women’s history, Scott thus argues for the replacement of this idealized lost object with a reconceived model of “feminism as a restless critical operation” unattached to any essentialized notions of identity

(35). The second chapter demonstrates how such a critique might unfold in practice. Re-imagining identity as a process of *echoing*, a “repetition [that] constitutes alteration” (52), Scott analyzes a series of writings by early French feminists—particularly scenes involving the recurrent figures of the female “orator” and the “mother”—in order to demonstrate how, from a contemporary perspective, a fantasized narrative of sameness, whereby earlier feminist arguments lead seamlessly to their culmination in contemporary successes, has tended to elide important conflicts and differences between feminists in earlier periods. Chapter three discusses how the field of twenty-first century feminist thought and political action are just as discontinuous, albeit in relation to a radically different context. However, the fissures between, for example, a universalizing, “First-World” feminism, and the particular engagements emerging from the “global circulation of feminist strategies” (80) are, for Scott, a source of critical possibility and (qualified) hope. Localized, decentralized, and heterogeneous feminist strategies, exemplified by the Women In Black movement, thus contest the “reductive categorizing” and “ruses of essentialism” (74, 75) that structure the heavily racialized and gendered discourse of the so-called “war on terror.” Scott’s fourth chapter extends this focus on the complex intersections of gender, race, and nation in the post-9/11 world. Dissatisfied with the overly hasty equations made by some feminists in the context of debates in France about the *hijab*, between the secular culture of the West and women’s liberation on the one hand, and Islam and misogyny on the other, Scott responds by tracing the ambivalent, contradictory relation that has inhered between secularism and gender equality since the very founding of the French Republic. In her fifth chapter, Scott continues her attempt to link contemporary and historical gender politics in France, analyzing the ways in which a particular strand of French nationalism has been structured around the metaphor of heteronormative sexual “seduction.”

Scott concludes *The Fantasy of Feminist History* with a brief epilogue in which she reflects on the question of archiving the documents of feminist theory (including her own work). Wondering initially if “there might be a contradiction ... between the conservative tendency of any archive and the avowed commitment to revolution” of many feminist theorists and scholars, she ultimately rejects this idea of archivization as “imprisonment” in favour of a model of the archive as a dynamic, contested space and site of transference encounters between the historian and her objects of study (143, 145). Here, Scott seeks to differentiate the specialized territory of the historian from the object of the musings of “philosophers and others who haven’t spent much time in archives,” including Jacques Derrida, whose *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* she briefly references here (143). But Derrida’s 1996 monograph, which similarly focuses on the relation between psychoanalysis and history, suggests, in turn, an important limitation to Scott’s overall approach in this book. Derrida devotes much of *Archive Fever* to discussing the work of the Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi,

whose reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* attempts to prove, in an exemplary scholarly mode, that Freud's wildly speculative argument about the Egyptian origins of Moses is indeed historically inaccurate. Yet Yerushalmi's text simultaneously calls into question its own status as objective history by concluding with a "Monologue with Freud" in which the father of psychoanalysis is conjured as a spectral presence able to discourse directly with the historian. Breaking with historiographic convention by "dar[ing] to speak to the phantom" (Derrida 39), Yerushalmi, in Derrida's estimation, points to an outside or fissure in determinate knowledge, thus resisting the lure of a closed-off, totalized archive. There is a certain performative aspect here—whereby an argument is secured via the generic *form* of a text—that is rather lacking in Scott's book. Despite, from the outset, stressing an urgent need "to attend to passion and madness in the writing of history" (2)—that, in other words, feminist scholars should approach history with a kind of unbounded *jouissance*, as part of their ongoing attempts to resist ideological strictures that persist in disciplinary and methodological norms—Scott herself remains curiously bound to sober expression and rational analysis. In the end, Scott's claim that the titular "fantasy" and its related concepts (passion, the irrational, the unconscious, and so forth) "disrupts ... the certainty of disciplined history's categories" (21) remains something of an abstraction, rather than a fully fleshed-out method for doing history differently.

That being said, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* remains a fascinating and timely engagement with important questions concerning the rhetoric and ideology of historical representation, and it will undoubtedly have broad appeal for scholars working in and across a range of disciplines and fields of study, including history, gender studies, critical theory, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonialism. Scott is particularly adept at rendering complex theoretical concepts in eminently clear, readable terms, as well as at providing concise genealogies of the institutional, intellectual, and social contexts in which those concepts were initially developed and have been put to use subsequently. She is also good at reminding us of what is at stake in the histories we write, and that thinking about the way we tell stories about the past has no little bearing on urgent political questions in the present.

### Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996. Print.

---

Theo Finigan received his PhD from the University of Alberta, where he is currently an instructor in the Department of English and Film Studies. His research interests include twentieth- and twenty-first-century American fiction, historical representation in fiction and theory, critical theory, postmodernism, the literature and culture of the Cold War, and nuclear criticism. He has essays published or forthcoming in *Critique*, *English Studies in Canada*, *ImageText*, *Mosaic*, and *Science Fiction Studies*.