

Im Gespräch

“Reverberations”

Dörte Lerp und Tobias Metzler im Gespräch mit Joan W. Scott

Vom 6. bis 9. Juni 2002 fand die „12. Berkshire Conference on the History of Women“ an der University of Connecticut zum Thema „local knowledge – global knowledge“ statt. Joan Scott hat dort unter dem Titel „Feminist Reverberations“ einen viel beachteten, aber auch heftig diskutierten Hauptvortrag gehalten, in dem sie sich mit den Erkenntnismöglichkeiten auseinandersetzt, die ihrer Meinung nach in der Geschlechterforschung für die Analyse der aktuellen politischen Lage liegen. Ihr Beitrag ist auf Deutsch in „Werkstatt-Geschichte“ unter dem Titel „Feministische Echos und Nachbeben“ erschienen.¹ Im März dieses Jahres hat Joan Scott einen weiteren, wichtigen Vortrag zum Thema „Feminism's history“ im Rahmen des von Brigitte Schnegg geleiteten und von Caroline Arni koordinierten Graduiertenkollegs „Wandel der Geschlechterkulturen“ am „Interdisziplinären Zentrum für Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung“ (IZFG) der Universität Bern gehalten. Diesen Vortrag drucken wir in deutscher Übersetzung in diesem Heft ab. Die Berliner StudentInnen Dörte Lerp und Tobias Metzler² haben den Besuch von Joan Scott in der Schweiz genutzt, um am 7. März 2003 das folgende Interview über den Berkshire-Vortrag von Joan Scott und die sich daraus ergebenden Überlegungen zur aktuellen politischen Lage zu führen.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: You gave this paper as a keynote address at the *Berkshire Conference* entitled “local knowledge <-> global knowledge”. Why did you choose to talk about reverberations in this context?

1 Joan W. Scott, Feministische Echos und Nachbeben, in: WerkstattGeschichte 33, 11, 3 (2002), 59–77.

2 Dörte Lerp studiert Geschichte, Soziologie und Politikwissenschaft an der FU Berlin und der York University, Toronto. Ihre Studienschwerpunkte liegen auf Geschlechtergeschichte, Post-Colonial History und Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus. Sie ist Stipendiatin der Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes. Tobias Metzler studiert ebenfalls an der FU Berlin und der Yale University. Seine Fächer sind Geschichte, Judentum und Politikwissenschaft, seine Schwerpunkte Neuere Jüdische Geschichte, Kultur- und Ideengeschichte. Er ist Stipendiat der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Joan W. Scott: Because I was looking for a way to avoid the simple opposition of global and local, the notion that there was a global set of events or processes and then local reactions to them or that there were local reactions that then affected the global.

The notion that there was a clear opposition between the two seemed to me overly schematic in terms of representing the kinds of issues I wanted to do. Global <-> local presumes some kind of large scale/small scale separation that I think is often less the case. What reverberations does it imply that things happening in one place set off reactions in other places. But it is never quite clear what the origins of the sound or the sensation are. What I was looking for was something that was more about interaction, inter-causal effects and causes that were not as easily separated as local and global. To me reverberation seemed to do that in a useful way.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: To what extent was this paper directed at a specific audience of American women's or gender historians?

Joan W. Scott: Well, there was a double agenda. The *Berkshire Conference* of women's history is always an international conference and I knew that there would be a fairly sizeable international contingent of women's historians there. What I wanted to do was suggest to them that there was a voice – it was not my voice only – a position in American politics that was at odds with the prevailing image of a homogeneous, patriotic American national position. And I wanted the notion that there were dissenting voices to be heard.

So, first, I knew that it was going to be an international audience and I wanted to speak to them. Secondly, I knew that there would be differences of opinions among Americans in the audience. At that moment, in the post-September 11 politics, there was still very little articulated opposition to the outpouring of patriotism that followed September 11. I felt it was time to have some articulation of opposition. Now, since the pressure for war on Iraq has been building in the last few months, it becomes evident that there are millions of people in the United States who do not agree with the foreign policy of the Bush administration. It was harder to see that in June 2002 and it felt to me imperative to say something about it.

Tangled into this and not entirely separate from it was the increasingly clear position the Bush administration was taking on the Israel/Palestinian question. George Bush promised when he was running for office that he would find a negotiated settlement for the Middle East and that there would be a Palestinian State supported by America – and in fact there was a large Muslim vote for Bush because of that promise for and the commitment to a Palestinian state. Having seen that promise abandoned and American policy so clearly one sided in favor of Israel and Sharon and the Bush administration equating all Palestinians with terrorists, I felt somebody had to say something about that. Particularly as a Jew who is profoundly critical of Israeli foreign policy, watching the discussion become a discussion in which criticism of Israel was always dismissed as Anti-Semitism made me furious. So it felt particularly important for a Jewish voice – and I was not the only one, again, there were lots of people who signed petitions saying “as a Jew I can not support the policy of Israel” – but also in the context of this talk to make that a public statement. So that is what I was doing as well.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: How would you explain to European readers the specific problems critical scholars in the US have to face after September 11?

Joan W. Scott: Well, I think it has changed now but in the immediate aftermath of September 11 people were just stunned. And I think partly they were stunned, because as you already know in Europe Americans have a sense of complete invulnerability. War has never happened on our territory. The sense that there was some kind of clever organized attack on the tallest symbol of American capitalism, the financial capital of New York and of the world, was hugely symbolic but also horribly real. The destruction of thousands of lives was terrifying and initially nobody knew how to respond. You could not say as some Europeans did: "Well, the Americans had it coming. Finally they experience something that many of us have experienced for years." You could not say this, given the powerful destruction of life that had happened. So it was very hard to find the right critical position. You could not say 'we deserved it'. It was even difficult to say that American foreign policy had helped to sow the seeds of this hatred because that seemed to be justifying terrorism and this kind of terrorism is unacceptable to – I would say – most American Leftists.

It was really difficult to find the place from which to articulate a critique that did not seem insensitive to what had happened or supportive of terror, a position subtly nuanced enough in its critique of American foreign policy to enter the conversation and to have some weight in some way or another. What I find frustrating is the Left's inability in the United States to turn that sorrow and unhappiness and pain into an opposition to the war against Iraq. Some people are trying to do that. There are parents and families of people who died in the trade towers on September 11, who are as a group opposed to the war in Iraq on the grounds that they do not want to do that to anybody again. But the far more terrifying response is the way in which the Bush administration has turned that sense of fear and sorrow into a desire for revenge, first in Afghanistan and now in Iraq. There was a poll not long ago that said that something like forty percent of the American people right now think that it was Iraq that bombed the trade towers. That shows how successful the propaganda machine of the Bush administration has been.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: Do you see the events of September 11 and all that followed them as a setback for feminists and the situation of women around the world in general, and if so in what way?

Joan W. Scott: I do not think it was a setback. I think the Bush administration made calculated and cynical use of the feminist question to support a foreign policy that many feminists do not support; which was the notion that we were freeing the 'poor women' of Afghanistan from the tyranny of the Taliban. But aside from that, I don't think the events of September 11 and after had a specific gender dimension.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: You talk in your paper about a model of interaction as an answer to worldwide political crisis. Do you think that such an approach has any chance against the division of the world into Good and Evil that has been postulated lately?

Joan W. Scott: It has to have a chance otherwise we are lost. There is a very powerful ideological machine that we are working against. I think the only thing people who are ultimately scholars and intellectuals can do is keep poking at it, keep trying to offer different ways of thinking about it, of refusing the Good and Evil story and arguing instead that the story is always more complicated on both sides. What else can we do? I have a part in the paper about security regimes where I quote Iris Young. It seems to me that the United States is invoking security as a means of undermining democracy not only domestically but on the world scale. The Bush administration says that they know what is best for everyone and they do this in the name of security (we see how empty a promise that turns out to be now in Afghanistan and Iraq). The notion of negotiation, the old vision of internationalism, the notion that you negotiate strategically among different partners is rejected in favor of American unilateralism. When the demonstration happened on February 15 Bush said he was not going to be moved by a group of people expressing their opinion. They were just a focus group. He was the President, he was the leader, he knew what was good for this country and was going to do it despite what they say. That position flagrantly contradicts the idea that this is a country that is bringing democracy to the rest of the world.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: Where would you locate the roots of this? Do you think it is really a new quality in the attempt of the US-administration to universalize the protection ideology?

Joan W. Scott: I think there is a sector of the political world in the United States and in the administration represented now by Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. This group in the first Bush administration talked about the way in which American world hegemony could be secured now that the Cold War was over and there were no enemies to challenge the ultimate power of the United States. There was a plan for finding the way to guarantee American hegemony and it involved the destruction of the institutions of internationalism: treaties, conventions, the UN, even NATO, all of those institutions that put limits on the power of the United States. I think they had their chance when the second Bush was elected. I do not think that the father Bush subscribed to this vision of the world. But when Cheney became Vice President and Bush was elected – or stole the election depending on how you see it – this group had its chance to put this into operation. And I think from the beginning you could see Bush doing that. He tore up the Kyoto Treaty. The crisis in North Korea is a result of their dropping the Clinton policy of engagement. They are dropping the notion of being an intermediary in the Middle East in favor of siding with Israel in the Palestinian crisis. They wreaked havoc in the UN over Iraq, which is what I think their strategy wants to do.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: We were talking about reverberations at the beginning and it is interesting that you prefer to talk about feminist reverberations instead to echoes. Why is that?

Joan W. Scott: First, because I wrote a paper where I was already working with the notion of *echo*³ as a way of thinking about the transmission of ideas and the transformation of them. What I loved about echo was that once an echo gets going you have no idea where it started. It calls into question an easy linear origin story where you started here and ended up there. There was a back and forth motion which is true also of reverberations. The reason that I use reverberation here was partly because of the sense of an earthquake. What I was talking about somehow needed something more material, more physically jarring more frightening. An echo is fun. Children play with echoes. I remember the first time somebody taught me about what an echo meant. Going into a tunnel, my father said: "Why don't you shout" and my voice came back. There is something benign about echo. A reverberation felt more threatening more dangerous, that there was more at stake. You could feel the sensation and that was why I chose the notion of an earthquake. There were consequences of a seismic kind that I did not feel was implied as strongly with the word echo.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: You mentioned your paper on *Fantasy Echo*. There you talk about echoes in the context of identity formation. Do you think that the same mechanisms are at work by talking about reverberations?

Joan W. Scott: Yes and no. Yes, because in the example that I use in this paper of the Women in Black there is clearly an identification being established. Women in Black know about each other. They know they are connected when they go out and protest as Women in Black even though what they are protesting is completely different in different situations. In the examples I give they are not all the same. So there is a fantasized identification with other women all over the world who are as women engaged in protest. I think there is that phenomenon I tried to describe in the *fantasy echo*-paper. But here, maybe because the context is global <-> local and because I am trying to break down that action and response notion and to argue that there is already a set of intersections that have to be explored, it feels that there is a different object. It is not so much the construction of identity as the transmission of ideas and the possibilities for action. So it is a different problematic in some ways.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: If we think in terms of reverberations or echoes in the realm of historiography we still ask for origins. But do those origins really exist? The sound has to come from somewhere or movement has to come from somewhere or is it, that reverberations just produce other reverberations or echoes producing other echoes?

Joan W. Scott: I think if you are a historian there is no real origin. There are reverberations producing other echoes and reverberations. We could say that September 11 was the start of something, but in fact September 11 was a reverberation of American foreign policy and of developments in the Islamic world and the Middle East crisis. To explain any-

3 Joan W. Scott, *Fantasy Echo*. History and the Construction of Identity, in: *Critical Inquiry*, 27 (winter 2001), 284–304.

thing there is a long history of complicated events and processes that need to be brought together. Every event is over-determined already and it is also true of an earthquake. An earthquake does not just happen. There are seismic shifts that are going on for years and years and suddenly make themselves felt in a powerful and destabilizing way. If you are looking for the explanation you do not start at the earthquake. They will tell you on the radio afterwards that tectonic plates were shifting for a long while before. I think I was looking for a way to complicate the question of origin and to suggest that there is not a clear place in which this begins.

You always have to bring to bear a set of converging determinations, that all have their origins, that all come from a set of converging determinations, so that you are never clear on the precise starting point or you are arbitrary and say: "For the purposes of what I want to say we are starting here." But you know that you are arbitrary even if you are doing that.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: Where would you place the idea of reverberations in the debate of cultural transfers?

Joan W. Scott: That is a good question, because that is partly what I had in mind when I was thinking about the global/local stuff. Usually global <-> local was thought about as a kind of authentic culture reacting to a set of global transformations or global influences. In fact, I think it is very hard to find an authentic culture that has not already been transformed in some way or another and the whole notion of the preservation of an authentic culture is a way of resisting changes that have already taken place. So the reverberations in both directions are already there. The colonizer/colonized exchange is set up as a set of transformations, of behaviors, of conceptual reorientations that are in process already. And thinking of them in terms of reverberations is helpful. The model of the arrows pointing in each direction still posited some entities that were entirely separated from one another. What you want conceptually is the interconnection and the search for the interconnection. The notion of cultures resisting Western influence by arguing that feminism is a Western importation that will corrupt the families and tradition of a traditional society seems to me a political weapon rather than an accurate description of what is going on in the society. So the notion of reverberation carries with it the existence of back and forth influences rather than separated entities which meet and are forced together.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: You chose the Women in Black as an example of feminist reverberations. Do you think that these forms of mobilization will be more dominant in feminism or do you think it is just one part of it?

Joan W. Scott: I think it is one part. I chose them although it was tricky to do, because as you can see in the article there is a feminist essentialist reading that you could do of these Women in Black that makes me very uncomfortable. That is not my feminism. But it was such a powerful and good example of reverberations that I think happened in other ways among feminists. I think if you took the term gender and watch what happened to it as it made its little journeys around the world it is another form of feminist reverberation and a very different one from the example of the Women in Black.

But if you ask what are the social movements of the future going to look like: probably Women in Black is a better example than almost anything else you could give. Not so much because of its particular contents, but because of the reverberating form that it takes. In fact I think that is what terrorism is. I think in the aftermath of September 11 the rhetoric of the Bush administration organized all forms of violent protest under the umbrella of terrorism but there are vast differences among these groups whose example nonetheless influences other groups. The possibility of this kind of violent unpredictable interruption of the functioning of the nation state was out there to be borrowed and imitated and put into effect. I really do not think there is the equivalent of a Communist International for terrorism. The imaginary of terrorism now is that there is an organization called Al Quaida which is the equivalent of a nation state with someone like Bin Laden, at the head giving orders to the world. In fact I do not think that is the case. I think there are loosely organized groups with reverberations among them. This is not to deny the awfulness of terror and the similarities of the action. But I do not think that it is a coordinated centralized movement except in the imaginaries of post September 11 Western nation states (Israel is part of "the West" for those purposes). And it is convenient now for various governments to say: "We have terrorists, too. Come and help us to deal with our terrorists."

So I think to the extent you maybe would put terrorism on one side and Women in Black on the other, you have the emergence of disorganized or uncoordinated forms, partly imitated, partly inspired by one another. In the place of centralized organization, there are reverberations.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: Although you draw a clear line between the actions of the English suffragists and contemporary suicide bombers you suggest that those left outside the law are likely to behave unlawfully or even violently. Is physical violence the "right" of the "law-less"?

Joan W. Scott: No, but it may be the only recourse. The recourse of those who have no rights. I could see the utter frustration of the Palestinians leading to the kind of terrorist violence that is going on. I do not think they should be doing it, I wish they would stop, I think it is horrible, but when you are denied a voice in the life you are leading, when you are constantly subjected to humiliation, to exclusion, to having your land stolen, what do you do? Somebody said they saw a graffiti in Paris that said something like "Occupation is the infrastructure of terrorism" and that may be the case in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. I do not think it is the right of the group to exert this kind of violence, I think it is the utter incapacity to find another way of being seen as a group. That was the link to the English feminists. There too you had this exasperated sense of exclusion. The way to demonstrate the exclusion from the law was to act out. That acting out was a benign version – not always so benign, but compared to terrorist actions – of acting out by powerless people. First I thought of dropping this part. I was always very nervous about keeping it in because it does seem so horrific. And when I gave the talk, one woman got up and walked out at that point muttering to herself: "The idea that there is any similarity between Palestinian suicide bombers and the English feminists is ridiculous." She was furious. Even afterwards I thought of dropping it, but then I thought 'No'. Because the point is,

what happens when you put people outside the law? You cannot expect them to behave lawfully. And whether, as was once the hope, you could have a single state in Israel or, as was then the notion, you could have two states, the recognition of the political autonomy of these people has been brutally denied and frustrated.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: Soon after you gave this paper it was already translated into Arabic. This is not really surprising since you addressed the Middle East problem, and you talk about feminist movements in the Arab world. How do you think your ideas were perceived there?

Joan W. Scott: I think the main impulse to have it and to translate it was double. First, these were feminists at this conference and feminism has always had an ambiguous reputation in Middle Eastern countries, because of its connection to the west. It is the notion that I criticize in here, of western feminism saving the poor benighted women of Afghanistan. That kind of condescending western feminism is always resented and resisted both by leadership that says that feminism is antithetical to Islam and by Middle Eastern feminists who resent the presumed superiority of western feminists in relation to Middle Eastern feminists or Islamic feminists. It is not surprising that this paper would be taken as an example of a different kind of feminism and therefore for the purposes of Middle Eastern feminism would be offered as an example not of western superiority but of a critical western voice in relation to western feminism and American policy. Secondly, it is an American voice breaking with the notion that there is only one American position which is the pro-Israel position. It would be an example of the fact that there are voices, for their purposes feminist voices in the United States, who are on their side or at least more on their side than they had imagined the case to be. So it was not at all surprising to me that the Middle East would be the first place from which there was an eager attempt to have this paper, as an example of the fact that there could be another view point from the one that was presented or understood to be the dominant American one.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: Facing as you say with Clifford Geertz "a world in pieces", should we direct our attention towards the writing of world histories? How could this be done with your concept?

Joan W. Scott: I think it is already being attempted. I might be inventing the term reverberations, but I am not inventing the notion that there are complex interconnections that have to be exposed, in place of a notion that there are disparate civilizations that clash or come into contact at a particular moment or are transformed one by the other. There is a lot of that already out there, that suggests that you have to rethink world history as a series of intersecting processes rather than of cause and effect, domination and resistance. So I think it is already being done.

Dörte Lerp/Tobias Metzler: The political situation has changed a lot since you gave this paper. Would you give it the same way today as you did at the *Berkshire Conference* in 2002 or would you change anything?

Joan W. Scott: The situation has gotten worse so I think that much of it still remains in a form or sense of things that I would still say, for example the notion of saving women from now it is not only the Taliban but any Muslim fundamentalism. The security regime is even more virulent today. You could extend my critique to more places in terms of what is happening domestically in the United States concerning surveillance, an attempt to bypass ordinary traditional processes, have special courts for traitors and torturing prisoners in the name of outlawing terrorism. More is evident than was evident in June 2002 of the dangers to democracy of a security state. And in fact more is evident internationally in terms of the American assumption of superior vision about what the world needs. And then you have all of the ironies that you could point out more fully now: the situation of Turkey for example where American policy tried to silence a parliamentary vote, because the military and the leaders of the government felt it was more important to be on the American side than to listen on their own people. Exactly the opposite of what is supposed to happen is going to happen there. The notion of democracy is being squashed and the necessity to cooperate with the United States is overriding the democratic expression of the will of the people or some version of the will of the people. So there are more things to be said and more ways to see it.

I think would have a sense of greater urgency about – as I was talking before – what it means to destroy the institutions of internationalism and I might emphasize that more than I did in this paper, because I did not realize quite what was going on. And I think that I would feel less like a lone voice out there calling attention to these issues than I did in June 2002, because now there are millions of people in the United States who have made it clear that they do not support this policy. They do not support the necessity of war, they are refusing to accept the superior vision of the security state and they want to have a word about how they think politics should run.

There might be more of an emphasis on the way in which the reverberations of dissent have emanated out, maybe on the way in which the internet has provided an extraordinary rapid mobilization of opposition. You would have to factor in electronic technology into the notion of reverberation. I have not actually thought about that at all. That kind of instant communication the global forces rely on is paralleled by the instant communication available to those who resist or refuse to follow the orders that are being given. In those ways I think I would change it.

But I think I would stand by what its basic impulses are. One motive was, to talk about the ways in which a feminist methodology can address issues of power apart from the one's that have immediately to do with women. For me this was a very important part of the beginning of this paper or a justification for talking about things that apparently did not have anything to do with them by extending the analysis of power to realms that are not obviously about gender although they are gendered. And the second was to take up the issue of reverberation as a notion that feminists could use to think about their own global/local connections and relationships, to offer an alternative to the simple global/local opposition with the notion of reverberation. Those two things I would stand by. I might have other examples of resistance to add to the Women in Black. There might be other ways of doing the specifics of the argument but I think the argument by itself still stands.