

1. Background

Joan W. Scott's influential essay 'The Evidence of Experience' was written at a time when recovering the 'experience' of people and groups that had been marginalised in, or excluded from, conventional historical inquiry had become one of the major emphases in historical scholarship in western Europe and America. One of the seminal works in this undertaking had been E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), in which Thompson claimed that 'experience' was a key element in the process of class formation. '[C]lass happens', Thompson famously declared, 'when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.'¹ In his political writings at this time, Thompson described 'experience' in this sense as the 'raw material' of class consciousness, and by extension of history itself.² The subsequent development of women's history likewise sought to recover the 'experience' of women in the past, which had largely been excluded from conventional historical narratives. Some of the key figures in this movement, like Sheila Rowbotham, had been directly influenced by Thompson (although as his use of the term 'men' in the quotation above indicates, his own work had tended to present an androcentric [male-centred] view of working-class history).

2. Scott's intervention

Scott's essay takes issue with the idea that the 'experience' of people in the past exists, or existed, in a stable and coherent form that historians can simply recover. In place of the stable, coherent 'experience' that Thompson thought of as the 'raw material' of history, Scott argued that we should attend to the complex cultural, social, and political forces which shape the way people understand and construct the world in any particular time and place.

Furthermore, she rejected the implication that the focus on 'experience' tended to carry, that there are stable, autonomous individuals to whom 'experience' (of a world that is external to them) pertains or 'happens' – because this fails to recognise how the prevalent ideologies, norms, values, categories, concepts, and patterns of assumption and belief that operate in a particular time and place *make certain kinds of people*, particularly by constructing systems of 'difference' (that is, by establishing what it is to be 'normal' in that time and place, and identifying departures from that template as problematically *abnormal* – as, for instance, 'homosexuality' was constructed as a problematic deviation from a norm of heterosexuality from the late nineteenth century in western Europe).

¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 9.

² Id., 'The Long Revolution', *New Left Review* I/9 (May-June 1961), 33.

So, for instance, instead of seeking ‘the experience of women’ in history, Scott suggests that we should try to understand *the cultural, social and political forces* that define what it is to be a ‘woman’ in a particular time and place in history. Instead of seeking ‘the experience of gay men’, we should try to understand the cultural, social and political forces that define people who engage in certain activities as ‘gay men’ or as male ‘homosexuals’ in a particular time and place in history. And so on.

The ramifications of this way of thinking are huge: it shows that everything is historically-contingent, and it destabilises our conventional sense of ‘individuals’ as the subjects of history. In their place, we are able to think more flexibly and expansively of ‘subjects’ who are constantly being operated upon and transformed by forces beyond their control; and Scott would probably suggest that when we understand how those forces have worked in history, we equip ourselves to resist them and by doing so enter a situation that holds emancipatory potential.

Stuart Middleton
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