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THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN.*

BY AUGUSTE COMTE.

ABOUT the close of the year 1841 a correspondence began between Mr. John Stuart Mill and M. Auguste Comte. It became at once very cordial and friendly and continued so for some years. Mr. Mill accepted the *method* formulated by M. Comte in the "Cours de Philosophie positive." This acceptance was complete and remains so up to the present. Agreement on this point is the first and most essential; without it nothing can be accomplished; with it, everything. But while such was his relation to the method, it was wholly different as to the *doctrine*. Mr. Mill reserved this for future contemplation. Very much of it reflection and more extended observation have shown him to be well-founded, and to that part of it he has given his most unqualified adhesion. We may cite, among other things, M. Comte's view of human evolution; of the philosophical limits of the sciences; and of their concatenation into a series, which are perhaps the most important of "positive" doctrines. There were other points, however, on which the English philosopher dissented—a dissent prolonged up to the present time. Such are the study of economic conditions as a separate science—the present political economy; the study of the intellectual functions apart from their cerebral organs—the present psychology; and the social condition of women.

Mr. Mill has very recently devoted an entire work, or rather pamphlet, to the advocacy of his views on the relations of the sexes, with reference both to the family and to the social organism. Very few (we think) can read the letters, here for the first time presented to the English speaking public, without perceiving that "The Subjection of Women" † embodies, in great part, a substantial, if not an exact reproduction of the opinions and arguments communicated so many years ago to M. Comte. As far as the constitution of the positive philosophy is concerned, this question is of wholly minor importance; it can be decided either way without affecting its integrity. It is, however, the fundamental question in social statics without which that half of the science of sociology cannot be constituted; while the lively

* Discussion with Mr. J. S. Mill on the social condition of women.

† London, 1869; and New York, 1870.

sension about the condition and social destination of women, the more suitable does it appear to me to characterize profoundly the deplorable mental anarchy of our time, by showing the difficulty of a sufficient present convergence even among the minds of the élite, between whom there already exists, beside native sympathy, a logical harmony so profound as ours, and which, nevertheless, diverges, at least for the moment, on one of the most fundamental questions which sociology can agitate; upon the principal elementary base, to speak correctly, of all true social hierarchy. Such a spectacle might even be enough to inspire a kind of philosophical despair upon the final impossibility, as the religious spirits pretend, of constituting a true intellectual concord upon purely rational bases, if on the other hand a profound habitual estimation of our mental state, and even a sufficient personal experience, did not tend to clearly convince me that the present position of your mind constitutes in this respect only a necessarily temporary phase, the last indirect reflection of the great negative transition. All thinkers who seriously love women otherwise than as charming toys, have, in our day, passed, I believe, through an analogous situation; on my own part, I recollect very well the time when the strange work of Miss Mary Wollstonecraft* (before she espoused Godwin) produced a very strong impression upon me. It was even chiefly by laboring to elucidate for others the true elementary notions of domestic order, that I put my mind, about twenty years, irrevocably beyond the pale of all similar surprises of sentiment. I have no doubt that my special estimation of this fundamental principle in the work which I am about commencing, will suffice to dissipate, in this relation, all your uncertainties, if, before this moment, your own meditations do not essentially antedate this important demonstration, on which we can prematurely talk a little in our fraternal interview. In resuming summarily the indications of your last letter, I hope that our spontaneous concert is less distant than I at first feared. Although acknowledging the anatomical diversities which more than anything else separate the feminine organism from the great human type,† I think you have not allowed them a strong enough physiological participation, while you have perhaps exaggerated the possible influence of exercise, which, before everything, necessarily supposes a suitable constitution. If, according to your hypothesis, our cerebral apparatus never reached its adult state, all the exercise imaginable would not render it susceptible of the high elaborations that it ends by admitting of; and it is to this that I attribute the *avortement*, too frequent in our day, of many unhappy youths who are exercised at tasks repulsive to their age. Women are in the same category. In a methodical discussion, I will have little to add to your judicious esti-

* "A Vindication of the Rights of Women, with strictures on political and moral subjects." London, 1792.

† As Littré remarks, this expression is not well chosen; "human nature has no *human type* which is independent of woman. The human type can never, physically or morally, be conceived but as double; it comprises two inseparable parts."

mation of the normal limits of their faculties; but I find that you do not attach sufficient importance to the real consequences of such native inferiority. Their characteristic inaptitude for abstraction and construction, the almost complete impossibility of rejecting emotional inspiration in rational operations, though their passions are in general more generous, must continue to indefinitely interdict them from all immediate supreme direction of human affairs, not only in science or philosophy as you allow, but also in esthetic life and even in practical life, as well industrial as military, in which the spirit of consequence (*de suite*) constitutes assuredly the principal condition of prolonged success. I believe that women are as improper to direct any great commercial or manufacturing enterprise as any important military operation; with stronger reason are they radically incapable of all government, even domestic, but only of secondary administration. In any case, neither direction nor execution being suitable to them, they are essentially reserved for consultation and modification, in which their passive position permits them to utilize very happily their sagacity and their characteristic 'actuality.' I have been able to observe very closely the feminine organism, even in many eminent exceptions. I can further, on this subject, mention my own wife, who, without having happily written anything, at least up to the present, really possesses more mental force than the greater number of the most justly praised persons of her sex. I have everywhere found the essential characters of this type, a very insufficient aptitude for the generalization of relations, and for persistence in deductions as well as in the preponderance of reason over passion. All the cases of this kind are, in my eyes, too frequent and too pronounced, to permit the imputation of difference of results chiefly to diversity of education; for I have met with the same essential attributes where the whole surrounding influences had certainly tended to develop as far as possible an entirely different disposition. After all, is it not otherwise in many respects a final advantage rather than a real inconvenience for women, to have been saved from this disastrous education of words and entities which, during the great modern transition, has replaced ancient military education? As to the Fine Arts especially, is it not evident that for two or three centuries, many women have been very happily situated and trained for the cultivation, without ever having been able, nevertheless, to produce anything truly great—no more in music or painting than in poetry? By a more profound estimation of the whole field, one is, I think, led to recognize that this social order so much execrated is radically arranged, on the contrary, so as to essentially favor the proper scope of feminine qualities. Destined, beyond the maternal functions, to spontaneously constitute the domestic auxiliaries of all spiritual power, in supporting by sentiment the practical influence of intelligence to modify morally the natural reign of material force, women are more and more placed in the conditions most proper for this important mission, by their isolation itself

from active specialties which facilitates a judicious exercise of their kind and moderating influence, at the same time that their own interests are thus connected necessarily with the triumph of universal morality. If it were possible that their position could change in this respect and that they could become the equals of men instead of their companions, I believe that the qualities which you justly attribute to them would be much less developed. Their small instantaneous sagacity would become, for example, almost sterile, as soon as, ceasing to be passive without being indifferent, they would have to conceive and direct, in place of regarding and counselling without serious responsibility. Besides, for truly positive philosophers, who know how, in all cases, our systematic influence must be limited to wisely modify the exercise of natural laws, without ever thinking of radically changing their character and direction proper, the immense experience already accomplished, in this respect, by the whole of humanity must be, it seems to me, fully decisive; for we know the philosophical worth of the theatrical declamations on the pretended abuse of force on the part of the males. Although anatomical estimation has not yet sufficiently established the explicit demonstration of the organic superiority of our own species over the rest of animality, which has, indeed, only very recently become possible, physiological research has left no doubt upon the point, according to the single fact of the progressive ascendancy obtained by man.

It is nearly the same in the question of sexes, though to a much less degree; for how can the constant social subordination of the female sex be otherwise explained? The singular *emeute* organized in our day for the benefit of women, but not by them, will certainly in the end only add confirmation to this universal experience, although this grave incident of our anarchy may otherwise for the moment produce deplorable consequences, either private or public. The mass of our species was for ages everywhere plunged in a social condition much inferior in every way to that over which some now lament in women; but it has been, since the beginning of the Middle Ages, gradually abandoned among the most advanced peoples, because this collective subjection, a temporary condition of ancient sociability, did not really belong to any organic difference between the dominant and the dominated.* But, on the contrary, the social subordination of women will be necessarily indefinite, although progressively conformed to the normal universal type, because it directly reposes upon a natural inferiority which nothing can destroy, and which is even more pronounced among men than among the other superior animals. By rendering women continuously more suitable to their true general destination, I am convinced that the modern regeneration will more completely recall them to their eminently domestic life, from which the disorder inseparable

* See, on this illustration relative to the question of serfdom and slavery, further on in the third letter, p.

from the great modern transition has, I think, momentarily turned their attention in divers secondary respects. The natural movement of our industry certainly tends to gradually turn over to men professions for a long time carried on by women, and this spontaneous disposition is, in my eyes, only one example of the growing tendency of our sociability, to interdict women from all occupations which are not sufficiently reconcilable with their domestic destination, the importance of which will become more and more preponderant. This is very far, as you are aware, from interdicting them from a great and useful indirect participation in the entire social movement, which could have never been conducted by them alone, even as to the essential scope of opinions and manners which specially interest them. Every other mode of conceiving their status and consequently their duties and ours, will really be as contrary at the least to their own good as to universal harmony. If from the attitude of woman's protector, men enter a situation of rivalry toward her, she will become, I believe, very unhappy through the necessary impossibility in which she will soon find herself of sustaining such a competition, directly contrary to the conditions of her existence. I believe, therefore, that those who sincerely love her, who ardently desire the most complete evolution possible of the faculties and functions properly belonging to her, must desire that these anarchical utopias may never be tried."

The third letter in this *ensemble*, and the last we shall give, is dated Paris, November 14th, 1843. It is as follows: "Having now resumed my daily occupations, I hasten to reply to your important letter of October 30th before commencing my small work upon the 'Ecole polytechnique,' which, as it would take me a fortnight, would delay too long a response which I regard as the present termination of our great biologicico-sociological discussion. The general impression left upon my mind by this letter, leads me, indeed, to think that this discussion has now reached as far as it could with any utility be pushed; in short, that there would at present be more inconvenience than advantage in further prolonging it, and it seems to me from your closing words, that, at base, you are not far removed from the same opinion. Without your divers arguments on this subject having in any way shaken or even modified any of my previous convictions, they have proved to me that the time has not yet come for seeing you arrive at the fundamental truths upon this capital point which I have for a long time received, but leave me, nevertheless, in all its fullness, the hope that your further meditations may end by leading you also to the same conclusion. In our present position we agree neither upon the principles nor even the facts which must indispensably contribute to the decision; and, consequently, it becomes proper not to finally close the discussion, but to indefinitely suspend it, until such time as on one side or the other the conditions of a useful resumption are found effectively fulfilled. Still, I think I ought, for the last time, to take up

summarily the principal articles of your letter, in order the better to characterize as I have not hitherto been able to do so, the essential points of opposition, at once logical and scientific, thus established between us in this respect.

“In the beginning, I share essentially your logical opinion as to the superior difficulty now offered by questions of social statics as compared with dynamical questions. However, although the positive elaboration of the latter is now much more mature, at the same time that it is happily more urgent, I believe it possible to demonstrate immediately the principal bases of static Sociology, and I expect to give an example of it in the methodical treatise which I will commence at the end of the present winter. I even think that without this preliminary condition the dynamical theory would not have sufficient rationality. I can now feel bold, as, for my own mind, this preamble has been accomplished for many years, although I have not hitherto been able to sufficiently develop this order of convictions so as to have them properly shared by other thinkers. Owing to the fact that the fundamental laws of existence can never be really suspended, it is very difficult to clearly distinguish their continuous influence in the study of the phenomena of activity; but this is not, however, impossible, as we can do so by properly estimating what is common to all the essential cases offered by them. Besides, I believe that the preliminary light shed by pure Biology, and which then has, especially in the present question, a superior importance, is now much more advanced than you seem ready to admit, despite the little satisfactory state of our biological studies. Doubtless, as you say, in reacting against the philosophical aberrations of the last century, contemporary thinkers have been at times led to exaggerate in the opposite direction. Thus Gall, in worthily upholding the preponderant influence of the primordial organism, has too much neglected that of education so abusively extolled by Helvetius. But, though the truth is assuredly between the two, it is far, in my opinion, from consisting in the exact balance (*juste milieu*), and is found much nearer the present opinion than the preceding. It was very natural to at first estimate the external influences as plainer, and this is what the eighteenth century has everywhere done on all biological subjects in which the notions of the medium are always shown before that of the organism. But this is surely not the normal state of biological philosophy, in which the organic conditions must certainly prevail; since it is the organism and not the medium that makes us men rather than monkeys or dogs, and which even determines our special mode of humanity to a degree much more circumscribed than is commonly believed. Under the logical aspect, by applying the natural march that your valuable treatise has so judiciously characterized as the Method of Residues,* we cannot, it seems to me, especially in such

* See “Mill’s Logic,” Vol. III. chap. viii. 3d London Ed. (1851) Vol. I, pp. 404, 405.

complex subjects, regard as indifferent the order of partial subtractions which ought always to be followed out as far as possible according to the decreasing importance that a primary general estimation spontaneously awards to the diverse determinable influences; in short, that in biological researches we ought most frequently to reverse the order which you believe always preferable, viz., from the external to the internal.

“I regret exceedingly that the grave defects of co-ordination inherent in Gall’s work should have so shocked a mind as methodical as yours, thus hindering you hitherto from appreciating the fundamental reality of his essential demonstrations, abstraction made of all irrational or premature localization. You may, perhaps, in this respect be less dissatisfied with his great early work, (*Analogie et physiologie du système nerveux en général et du cerveau en particulier*, in 4to,) although it is probably too anatomical for your purpose. But the same fundamental ideas are presented in better logical form in the more systematic works of Spurzheim, that is to say, *Observations sur la phrénologie, Essai philosophique sur les facultés morales et intellectuelles*, the work upon *Education*, and even that relating to insanity, which constitute in all only four thin octavo volumes, easily read in one or two weeks. Without the subordination of sexes being directly examined there, we can, however, regard this doctrine as having already sufficiently established, as far, at least, as Biology can do so, the fundamental principle of the domestic hierarchy. Before philosophical Biology had properly arisen under Vicq. d’Azyr and Bichat, and altogether independently of cerebral physiology, an estimable work, though not very eminent, still deserving to be read, had already attempted to found this principle upon the single preponderant consideration of physical destination; it is a small treatise of a Montpellier physician, (Roussel), entitled *Système physique et morale de la femme*, published in 1775, under the scientific impulsion of the labors of Borden, the great precursor of Bichat. Comparative Biology seems to me, further, to leave no real doubt on this subject. In following, for instance, M. de Blainville’s lectures, though he had in view no thesis whatsoever on this question, one cannot fail to perceive arise from the ensemble of the studies on animals, the general law of the superiority of the masculine sex in all the higher part of the living hierarchy; we will have to descend among the invertebrates in order to find, and still very rarely, notable exceptions to this great organic rule, which presents besides the diversity of the sexes as increasing with the degree of organization. I am, therefore, far from agreeing to abandon biological considerations, although I regard the sociological appreciation as being able without other aid to directly establish this important notion; but biological inspirations must then serve to properly direct sociological speculations, which, in this respect, as in all other elementary ones, seem to me ought to offer only a sort of philosophical prolongation of the great biological theorems.

“As to the sociological appreciation separately regarded, I cannot agree with you that the English medium is more favorable to the mental and moral development of women than the French. Abstraction made of all national vanity, of which you know me certainly to be very independent, I believe, on the contrary, that the ladies of France should be more developed from this very cause, that they live in more complete society with men. This diversity between us is otherwise only a consequence of another more general, consisting in the fact that the social constitution appears to you to have been hitherto unfavorable to feminine development, while it seems to me very proper for cultivating the qualities proper for women. As to the rest, I am nowise competent to contest your observation upon English households. But I believe that in it you confound too much simple domestic *administration* with the true general *government* of the family. In all Occidental Europe, I believe that, as in England, households are administered by the women; but everywhere also, save individual anomalies, it is the men who govern the common affairs of the family.

“I cannot at all accept your comparison of the condition of women to that of any sort of slaves. I have indicated this analogy only to prevent a natural enough objection, tending to indirectly invalidate my conclusion upon the passage from fact to principle. But, on a direct comparison of the two cases, it seems to me that, since the establishment of monogamy, and especially in modern sociability, the term ‘servitude’ is extremely vicious when meant to characterize the social state of our gentle partners, and consequently I can nowise accept the historical parallelism upon the simultaneous variations of two situations so radically heterogeneous. Sale and non-possession are the principal characters of all slavery—they have certainly never been applicable to the occidentals of the last five centuries.*

“As to the progress which, for a century, is gradually working for feminine emancipation, I do not at all believe in it, either as a fact or as a principle. Our female authors seem to me no way superior, in reality, to Mme. de Sévigné, Mme. de la Fayette, Mme. de Motteville, and other remarkable ladies of the seventeenth century. I cannot decide whether it is otherwise in England. The woman who, under a man’s name, (George Sand,) has now become so celebrated among us, appears to me, at base, very inferior, not only in propriety, but even in feminine originality, to the greater number of these estimable types.

* See remarks above, p. 174, and also “The Subjection of Women,” 2d London Ed., pp. 8, 9, 18, ff, and 28. Mr. Mill here traces pathetically, nay, almost tragically, the parallelism mentioned by M. Comte. One thought suggested itself while reading it: Why slave-masters who were apparently as much interested as husbands in having their slaves docile, etc., did not try the same means to accomplish this end as Mr. Mill asserts husbands to have done? Should his genesis of the present condition of women prove true, of which certain damaging omissions make us afraid, we would recommend it to Mr. Darwin as the most long-continued and successful piece of artificial “selection” to be anywhere found.—Tr.

I do not see, in reality, any other notable increase than that of the number and material fecundity of these authoresses, as Molière probably foresaw; but I am doubtful whether any true progress is shown in it. This movement consists chiefly in a growing intemperance, which appears to me a sad but very natural consequence (or rather face) of our universal mental anarchy since the inevitable decay of the frail bases that theology had provisionally supplied to the entirety of great moral and social notions. Beside this part of the negative disturbance having been found especially favored by energetic passions, it has had only to contend against perhaps the weakest part of theological sociability; for what can be more illusory than to found the domestic hierarchy upon Adam's supernumerary rib? Is it astonishing, that principles so lightly constituted, have not been able to resist the shock of impassioned anarchy? But their momentary discredit really proves no more than the necessity for better establishing them. Under this relation the deplorable discussions thus raised, although yet essentially deprived of logical reasonableness, besides being unhappily inevitable, are at least useful, in obliging us to more profoundly fathom the intimate motives of this indispensable domestic co-ordination. The present *emeute* of women, or rather of some women, will in the end have no other result than that of presenting experimentally the insurmountable reality of the fundamental principle of such subordination, which must then react profoundly upon all the other parts of social economy; but this useful conclusion will be found purchased at the price of much public and private misery, which a more philosophical advance would have shunned were such rationality now possible. If this disastrous social equality of the two sexes were ever really attempted, it would immediately radically disturb the conditions of existence of the sex that some desire thus to favor, and with regard to which the present protection, that must alone be completed by regulating it, would then be converted into a competition impossible to habitually sustain. Such an assimilation will otherwise tend morally to destroy the principal charm which now draws us towards women, and which resulting from a sufficient harmony between social diversity and organic diversity, supposes women to be in an essentially passive and speculative situation that can in no way hinder their just participation in all great social sympathies. If such a principle of repulsion could be pushed to its extreme natural limit, I venture to affirm that it will appear directly opposed to the reproduction of our species, which restores, in this respect, the biological point of view, more intimately connected there than elsewhere with the sociological.

"All this may perhaps appear to you very extended for a discussion which I regarded as provisionally terminated; but for this very reason I undertook to better characterize our principal dissidences. For the rest, although without present result, I am far from regretting that you have begun it, for it will assist me considerably in properly feeling the

essential points to be especially insisted upon in my forthcoming treatise, in my attempt at a static demonstration of a principle which, despite its eminently elementary nature, is yet so profoundly misunderstood by so superior and so well-prepared a mind. Permit me, however, to hope, according to my own previous experience, that this situation of your judgment constitutes really only a last transient phase of the great negative transition belonging to our age.*

* Mr. Mill has forcibly called attention (work cited, p. 99) to a fact which deserves careful study. After acknowledging that no woman had been a Homer, an Aristotle, or a Michael Angelo, he remarks: "It is a curious consideration, that the only things which the existing law excludes women from doing, are the things which they have proved they are able to do. * * * Their vocation for government has made its way and become conspicuous through the very few opportunities which have been given, while in the lines of distinction, which apparently were freely open to them, they have by no means so eminently distinguished themselves." From the way Mr. Mill puts it, the distinction seems well founded, and on further reflection, seems one of the most "curious" things in the world. That exercise and freedom should in woman's case act the very reverse of what they do among men, seems to go far to substantiate M. Comte's doctrine of fundamental difference between the sexes. While it seems in the nature of a standing "miracle" to know how a state could have originated or how it could be kept up that interdicts beings from their real natural vocation. If I understand the English philosopher correctly, it might be wholesome for women to have an edict on our statute books against writing poetry or painting; if it could act as political proscription seemingly does, all should hope for the early arrival of the day.—*T*r.