

How Power came to Men

By Martine Storti

Éliane Viennot continues her investigation of the history of the inequality, hierarchies and disqualifications that have been imposed on women. Legally organising their subjection is not enough; the latter also has to be legitimated.

Reviewed: Éliane Viennot, *L'âge d'or de l'ordre masculin. La France, les femmes et le pouvoir, 1804-1860* ("The Golden Age of the Masculine Order. France, Women and Power, 1804-1860"), Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2020, 384 p., 25 €.

Éliane Viennot's new book, *L'âge d'or de l'ordre masculin*, constitutes a new chapter in the research project which she herself has named "La France, les femmes et le pouvoir" ("France, Women and Power"): a journey through French history from the 5th century onwards from a specific angle, that of male domination, starting - this was the first chapter - with "L'invention de la loi salique" ("The Invention of the Salic Law"), a book that was published in 2006 and which runs from the 5th to the 16th century.

Then came the exploration of the "résistances de la société" ("Resistances of Society") (2008), from the reign of Henry IV to the end of the *Ancien Régime*, and then in 2016 a third take under the title "Et la modernité fut masculine" ("And Modernity was Male"), which showed how the first few years of the French Revolution, which were marked by advances in terms of sexual equality, were quickly followed by a "reigning in" of women, who, to use Olympe de Gouges' expression, were not able to "mount the rostrum" even though they could very well mount the scaffold.

From the Code Napoléon to the First Female Baccalaureate Graduate

The fourth book picks up where the previous one had left off, namely in 1804 - the year in which the First Empire and the code Napoléon were proclaimed - and ends in 1860. Why 1860? Because one year earlier, in June 1859, the schoolteacher Julie-Victoire Daubié won the first prize in the competition of the Académie des sciences, belles-lettres et arts de Lyon ("Lyon Academy of Sciences, Literature and Arts") for an essay on *La Femme pauvre au XIXe siècle* ("The Poor Woman in the 19th Century"). And because one year later, in 1861, she would be the first woman to register to sit the baccalaureate exam and pass it successfully.

A major change and the effect of the determined struggle of women who, throughout the previous decades of this century, had to challenge a "masculine order" that became more entrenched with every year that went by.

The line drawn by the historian is at odds with what she calls a prevalent *doxa* and which she largely attributes to the "republican school system"(p. 7), according to which the contemporary era starts with the French Revolution and the rest, i.e. modernity, is nothing more than a history of social and political progress. For women too? No, not for women, replies Éliane Viennot - whatever the regime in place during the six decades she examines: empire, monarchy or republic. This is because the intention was always, decade after decade, to "contain women", to "keep them away from the circles of power", to "make them dependent on men, legally, materially, sexually", to "denigrate them without rest" (p. 345).

What makes this work immensely relevant is above all the way in which it reveals this continuity, by unravelling, stitch by stitch, the construction and legitimisation of male domination in numerous areas.

This construction and legitimisation rely, ideologically, on a differentialist fundamentalism that justifies a separatism between women and men. But this supposed difference between the sexes is relentlessly reaffirmed in order to conceal the real issue, namely that of the perpetuation of masculine power and the refusal to share this power, whatever area it is expressed and exercised in: the family, politics, education, medicine, literature, science etc. The power of the father, the husband, the emperor, the king, the member of parliament, the professor, the scholar, the writer...

Organising the Subjection of Women

The legal organisation of the domination of men and subjection of women was achieved through a decisive action at the beginning of the century: the Code civil, which was promulgated in March 1804, a few weeks before the Empire was proclaimed. Viennot sees this as a “legal straightjacket for women” (p. 46) both in the private and public spheres, since it institutionalises the omnipotence of the husband and father.

This subjection is equally apparent in the various aspects of social and intellectual life that Viennot examines, for example education. While the first part of the 19th century is rich “in progress in terms of male education”, the same cannot be said, she points out, for girls. The “disinvestment of the State is total from one regime to the next (p. 57), with the exception of the “educational institutions of the Légion d’honneur”, which were created by Napoleon and aimed at the poor daughters of those who had “proved worthy of the Empire”. Other than this, the education of girls, and even then of only a small number of them, was left in the hands of private, mainly religious initiatives up until 1836, when municipalities were invited to open girls’ schools, but without any strict obligation to do so. And in 1860, Julie Daubié’s act of registering to sit her baccalaureate exam was in fact illegal.

Subjection is also at play in the world of work, which sees “the concentration of women in the underqualified jobs of the social sector”(p. 61), which includes that of education, in which women enjoy neither the status, nor the wages, nor the recognition, nor the training granted to their male colleagues, or that of childcare for infants and toddlers.

There is subjection too in the political realm: “two emperors, three kings, one president of the Republic and an array of men making up the provisional government of 1848”(p. 25), but these same prospects are out of reach for women. The revolution of 1848 extends citizenship to all men - an incontrovertible step forward - but leaves women excluded from voting rights and the concept of the universal - the suffrage that is thus qualified being exclusively male. Fraternity is the right word for this society which included only brothers.

The Legitimation of the Subjection of Women

It is not enough to use constitutions, laws, regulations and institutions to organise the subjection of women - it must also be legitimised. And there is no shortage of people who take on this task. Éliane Viennot's book provides a precise inventory of various contributions, whether they come from legal experts, doctors, anatomists, linguists, historians, philosophers, writers, literary critics or editors - an "intellectual class hard at work" on "justifying the distribution of roles and powers" (p. 131). The axis according to which this distribution is legitimised is that of the difference between the sexes, a difference that is portrayed as natural and essential - and therefore unavoidable.

A woman is above all a body. We should in fact say above all a uterus: through their sex and their belly, women are born for marriage, for maternity, for the "domestic hearth", not for "public life" (except for prostitutes), and even less for "an effort of the mind" (p. 90), for example that required by philosophy - as is pointed out by, among many others, Eugène Lerminier, a professor at the Collège de France. Or as it made clear under the pen of Proudhon, for whom there is in woman "in the brain as in the stomach some organ incapable of overcoming on its own its native inertia and that only the male mind is able to make function - something which it does not, even then, always succeed in doing" (p. 116).

The difference between the sexes justifies inequalities, hierarchies, disqualifications. It would be impossible to go into all relevant details here, but let us pause for a moment on the main target that is taken aim at: "women of letters". "The women who are the most mistreated in 19th century discourse are those who publish their writings, whatever genre they are working in" (p. 84). Why? Because they dare to venture onto a terrain that men view as belonging to them and that, above all and to make matters worse, they can succeed in.

Germaine de Staël, Félicité de Genlis, Louise Colet, Marie d'Agoult, and George Sand are the most famous figures. But there are many others, mentioned throughout the pages written by Éliane Viennot, who has carried out a considerable endeavour here in terms of increasing the visibility both of the women who did manage to get their writing published and of the authors of misogynistic, sexist and antifeminist texts that went from the "vituperation of female novelists" to the fabrication of the "blue-stocking", i.e. the woman who writes and therefore has never known love, according to Jules Janin, since "love was scared by these pinched lips that incessantly vomit the

rhymes of both sexes; love stepped back before these horrible fingers stained with ink..." (p. 100)

But this phenomenon does not, alas, stop at the criticisms of a Jules Janin or a Gustave Lanson. Others take part too, and we are filled with sadness at having to cite the names of Balzac, Lamartine, or Stendhal. Yes, Stendhal, who paints such beautiful portraits of women in his novels, but who is, according to Viennot, far from being one of the least active in this enterprise.

The Part of Feminists

The last chapter offers a chance to breathe, however, as it turns towards those women who resisted "the extraordinary offensive carried out in the 19th century against the possibility of equality between the sexes, and thus against women" (p. 263): feminists, who still only existed in small numbers, but who were nevertheless relentless fighters, writers, schoolteachers, workers, political activists, and who were met with disdain, opprobrium, insults, violence in words and in deed, and even sometimes imprisonment.

But there they were, ever more determined. They got organised, they created clubs, such as the Athénée des Dames ("Ladies' Atheneum"), or the Club de l'émancipation des femmes ("Club for the emancipation of women"), or the Club fraternel des lingères ("Fraternal Club of Linen Keepers"). They launched appeals, created newspapers to make their voices heard: *La femme libre*, *La tribune des femmes*, *Le journal des femmes*, *La Gazette des femmes*, etc. How can we not think back, when we read this pages, to the blossoming of newspapers and magazines that their descendants would create decades later in the 1970s, or to the blogs, websites and podcasts being made by current feminists!

We must, then, mention the names, on top of those of the aforementioned writers, of these indefatigable activists: Claire Démar, Jeanne Deroin, Flora Tristan, Eugénie Niboyet, Désirée Gay, Pauline Roland, Reine Guindorf, Suzanne Voilquin, Fanny Richomme. All of them denounced the power given to men in marriage, the exclusion of women from citizenship, or "the devaluation caused by the label of *woman author*", as experienced by Balzac's young sister, Laure de Surville (p. 284).

But all of them called first and foremost for the development of girls' education. While girls were sent to primary school at almost the same rate as boys during the Second Empire, it would be many years before this was the case at the secondary and higher education levels.

To those who today enjoy presenting France as a "feminine nation" or who claim that the equality between women and men is an essential component of French identity, we can only recommend reading this book. It will allow them to understand where we come from and above all why we have needed so many years and struggles for the equality and liberty of women to finally be conquered - a conquest that still remains unfinished.

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