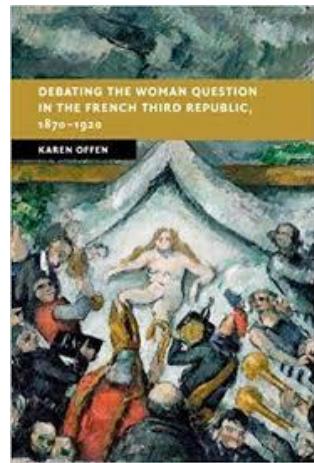


## Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870–1920

Karen Offen, 2017, pages 81 & 82

(...) really counts is the ability to reason, not to stuff one's head with facts. In the fourth installment of her response, Lagrave laid out the innumerable ways in which French culture hampered women's development. Far from accepting the theory of ongoing divergence in the aptitudes of the sexes, Lagrave concluded, "We believe that one can purify modern societies only by raising up women, through her participation in science, through the development of all her faculties, through her emancipation from the old moral slavery. Only thus can humanity accomplish its higher evolution." In short, Louise Lagrave was not impressed with the detrimental conclusions that Delaunay, LeBon, and others had produced and she bravely disputed both their "scientific" findings and their significance.



Other republican women's rights advocates would latch onto the findings of Dr. Leonce Manouvrier (even though they sometimes systematically overinterpreted his conclusions). In the June 1882 issue of the *Revue Scientifique*, this young physician-anthropologist argued that the volume of the skull and brain weights between women and men were comparable, provided one takes body mass into account. Arguing directly against LeBon, Manouvrier insisted that brain weight differences alone could not be used, as LeBon claimed in his earlier work, to support a case for the intellectual inferiority of women. "The sexual difference in brain weight and skull volume cannot be interpreted scientifically in a way that is unfavorable to the feminine sex. The evidence proves that this difference is due to a difference in body mass and that absolutely nothing in anatomy proves that woman is inferior to man with respect to her intellectual faculties."<sup>881</sup> In a series of later articles published in the *Revue de l'Ecole d'Anthropologie de Paris* and its successor, the *Revue Anthropologique*, Manouvrier spelled out the political implications of his work. Even as he castigated the influence of "male pride" in the early work of physical anthropologists, he maintained that such prejudices do often carry a grain of truth. In Manouvrier's view, the muscular superiority of males and the gestational requirements of females necessarily resulted in a sexual division of labor that accentuated secondary sexual differences. Although male supremacy was not necessarily eternally destined, he allowed, it had resulted from social necessity. Thus, Manouvrier's support for women's equality, based on

1 See Leonce Manouvrier, "La Question du poids de l'encephale et de ses rapports avec l'intelligence," *La Revue Scientifique*, 3rd series, 29:2 (2 June 1882), 673-683; *Sur l'Interpretation de la quantite dans l'encephale et du poids du cerveau en particulier* (Paris: G. Masson, 1885; offprint, *Memoires de la Societe d'Anthropologie de Paris*, 2e ser., vol. 3, pp. 137–326); "Indications anatomiques et physiologiques relatives aux attributions naturelles de la femme," *Congres ... du Droit des femmes*, pp. 41-51; and "Indications anatomiques et physiologiques relatifs aux attributions naturelles de la femme," *Bulletin de l'Union Universelle des Femmes*, n° 12 (15 December 1890), 9–12, & n° 13 (15 January 1891), 12-14. See also the later commentary on Manouvrier's contributions by Marya Cheliga in the *Revue Encyclopedique Larousse*, 1896, pp. 829–830.

Curiously, Manouvrier's findings are not discussed by Paul Topinard in the pertinent sections (on brain differentials for women and men) of his book *Elements d'anthropologie generale* (Paris: A. Delahaye & E. Lecrosnier, 1885), chapters 13 & 16. This book is based on Topinard's courses at the *Ecole d'Anthropologie*, where he edited the *Revue d'Anthropologie*. Hecht, *End of the Soul*, p. 233, indicates that Manouvrier and Topinard strongly disagreed on whether the findings of anthropology should have a political agenda or apply its findings to contemporary human societies. Topinard was finally eased out of his chair at the Ecole.

his brain weight findings, did have functionalist limits.<sup>2</sup> In May 1883, the obstetrician Eugene Verrier (1824-1910) would give a public lecture, *La Femme devant la science*, in which he summarized Manouvrier's early findings.<sup>3</sup>

The same year, another progressive commentator on the findings of scientists, L. Cosson, would rehash the question of skeletal differences and brain differences, addressing his analysis directly to "les féministes" and to "those who are in the camp of the feminists."<sup>4</sup> He also spoke of "*chauvinisme masculin*." Cosson insisted that the woman question had become the "order of the day" for the civilized world and asserted that indifference was no longer permitted.<sup>5</sup> He supported women's right to employment and to remain single if they so desired, claiming that the individual was the fundamental unit of society (not the family). "Masculine rule," he argued (echoing Maria Deraismes' remarks about masculine aristocracy), "is the last citadel of privilege, of 'might makes right.' It is up to us, in the nineteenth century, to take up once again the work of 1789, which has been diverted from its course."<sup>6</sup> Another male-feminist had entered the lists. And yet, even L. Cosson had his limits; for one thing, he opposed coeducation of the sexes.

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2 In the early twentieth century, Manouvrier would criticize socialist feminists for advocating the emancipation of women through employment. He argued that this was no road to women's emancipation and that women, for the most part, understood this. He strongly opposed "concurrence" (competition) between the sexes in the labor market. In Manouvrier's worldview, men's and women's roles were inevitably (and should remain) distinct and women's role was primarily that of mother and menagere. See, in particular, Manouvrier's "Conclusions générales sur l'anthropologie des sexes et applications sociale," *Revue Mensuelle de l'Ecole d'Anthropologie*, 13:12 (December 1903), 405-423. He would restate such arguments with increasing vigor following the war of 1914-1918.

3 See the published version: Eugene Verrier, *La Femme devant la science, consideree au point de vue du systeme cerebrale. Conference faite a Paris, le 28 mai 1883, a la salle Rivoli* (Paris: Alcan-Levy, 1883).

4 See L. Cosson, *Essai sur la condition des femmes* (Paris: P. Dupont, 1883).

5 Cosson, *Essai*, pp. 59, 121, 125, for these terms.

6 Cosson, *Essai*, p. 322.