Despite Mill’s criticisms, Comte never relinquished his belief that biology (and especially phrenology) legitimated women’s subjection by demonstrating their intellectual inferiority. Furthermore, notwithstanding his admission that “moral” phenomena resulted from a composition of causes, Comte made no allowance for the kind of multifactorial analysis of mental capacities Mill proposed so as to take into account environmental influences. Now, if there was no more to Comte’s sexist stance than the previous set of arguments, the claim that, in the case of women’s subjection, Comte infringed his own methodological principles by reducing a sociological question to a biological matter would rest on safe grounds. But Comte had other resources in store that seem to belie this interpretative hypothesis.

It was indeed a characteristic feature of Comte’s treatment of the sexual equality issue, in both the Cours de philosophie positive and the correspondence with Mill, that it repeatedly underlined the twofold nature of the argument for women’s subjection, namely its biological and sociological aspects. The Fiftieth Lesson of the Cours explicitly stated that sociology showed the “radical incompatibility of any social existence with this chimerical equality of the sexes” by “supplementing, in its own way, [the] essential scientific assessment” provided by the “sound biological philosophy” developed by Gall and others.1 Similarly, Comte’s letters to Mill referred to their controversy as their “serious difference of opinion in sociological and biological aspects of the condition and social destiny of women” or as their “great biologic-sociologic discussion.”2 As for Mill, he readily acknowledged the two-pronged nature of their debate on this “important topic of biology and sociology.”3

1 Auguste Comte, Physique sociale, p. 186.
2 Auguste Comte to John Stuart Mill, October 5, 1843; in Haac [ed.], p. 188; Auguste Comte to John Stuart Mill, November 14, 1843; ibid., p. 206.
3 John Stuart Mill to Auguste Comte, August 30, 1843; ibid., p. 185.
What is more, both thinkers took it that the sociological argument was independent from its biological counterpart. This was what Mill wanted to convey when, stating that he would “lay aside considerations of anatomy,” he realized that “quite apart from any such considerations, [Comte] believ[ed] that precise analysis of general experience, both everyday and historical, [was] sufficient to establish [his] conclusions.” And although he scolded Mill for discarding what he regarded as relevant data, Comte agreed to broach the “sociological argument, separately considered.”

Now, if Comte really had an independent sociological argument to prove his case for the subjection of women, the charge of biological reductionism levelled at him would founder. By the same token, the view of Comte as the forefather of an autonomous sociology would regain some of its plausibility, even if the previous chapter has shown that when pressed by Mill to recognize the possible influence of “circumstances” on the formation of mental capacities, Comte dogmatically asserted the primacy of biological factors. For if a genuine sociological argument for women’s subjection can indeed be found in Comte, it is enough – at least logically – to salvage the consistency of his methodological plea for the autonomy of sociology with his actual treatment of the sexual equality issue from the uncompromisingly biological perspective he tried to impose on Mill. Undoubtedly, the possibility of such an argumentative recovery would appeal to anybody eager to preserve the systematicity Comte upheld as one of the main virtues of his “Positive Philosophy.” However, a minute analysis of his writings on the topic dispels the illusory coherence of Comtian thought.

As will be demonstrated in this chapter, none of the versions of the sociological argument for the subjection of women put forward by Comte can stand without appealing to some more or less implicit biological assumptions. More precisely, neither the “static” argument, which relies on phrenology to establish that women’s innate mental capacities do not allow them to be treated as men’s equals, nor the “dynamic” argument, which is based on a biologically-inspired developmental scheme that legitimates the continuation of the subjection of women by referring to the history of the relations between the sexes,