Monique Wittig

On the Social Contract

I have undertaken a difficult task, which is to measure and reevaluate the notion of social contract, taken as a notion of political philosophy. A notion born with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is also the title of a book by J.-J. Rousseau. Marx and Engels criticized it because it was not relevant in terms of class struggle, and therefore did not concern the proletariat. In The German Ideology they explain that the proletarian class, due to its relation to production and labor, can only confront the social order as an ensemble, as a whole, and that it has no choice but to destroy the state. In their opinion the term “social contract,” which implies a notion of individual choice and of voluntary association, could possibly be applied to the serfs. For in the course of several centuries they liberated themselves one by one, running away from the land to which they belonged. And it is also one by one that the serfs associated to form cities, hence their name, bourgeois (people who have formed a bourg). (It seems that as soon as Rousseau developed the idea of social contract as far as it has ever been developed, history outdated it. But not before some of his propositions were adopted without amendment by the French Revolutionary Assembly.)

I have always thought that women are a class structured very much as was the class of serfs. I see now that they can tear themselves away from the heterosexual order only by running away one by one. This explains my concern for a preindustrial notion such as the social contract. For the structure of our class in terms of the whole world is feudal in essence, maintaining side by side and in the same persons forms of production and of exploitation that are at the same time capitalist and precapitalist.

In broad terms that is one aspect of my task. Another aspect has to do with language. For to a writer language offers a very concrete matter to grasp hold of. It seems to me that the first, the permanent, and the final social contract is language. The basic agreement between human beings, indeed what makes them human and makes them social, is language. The story of the Tower of Babel is a perfect illustration of what happens when the agreement breaks down.
Since I have used several times the term "heterosexual contract" in my past writings as well as referred to the "social contract as heterosexual," it has become my task to reflect on the notion of social contract. Why is this notion so compelling even though it has supposedly been given up by modern science and history? Why does it reverberate here and now far from its initial momentum in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century? Why at the same time did I urge vehemently that we should break off the heterosexual social contract? The general question of the social contract in so far as it encompasses all human activity, thought, and relations is a philosophical question always present as long as "humankind [that] was born free . . . is everywhere in chains," to quote Rousseau. Its promise of being achieved for the good of all and of everyone can still be the object of a philosophical examination, and since it has not been fulfilled by history, it retains its utopian dimension. Thus formulated in its general aspect, the question extends to all humankind. Now when I say let us break off the heterosexual contract per se, I designate the group "women." But I did not mean that we must break off the social contract per se, because that would be absurd. For we must break it off as heterosexual. Leaning upon a philosophical examination of what a well-established social contract could do for us, I want to confront the historical conditions and conflicts that can lead us to end the obligations that bind us without our consent while we are not enjoying a reciprocal commitment that would be the necessary condition for our freedom, to paraphrase Rousseau.

The question of the social contract in the very terms of Jean-Jacques Rousseau is far from being obsolete, for, in what concerns its philosophical dimension, it was never developed further. The question of the sexes, which itself delineated very narrowly the general design of society, if approached from a philosophical point of view, encompasses and embodies the general idea of social contract. There are historical reasons as well to resuscitate the notion of social contract that have to do with the structures of the groups of sex and their particular situation among the relations of production and social intercourse.

The main approach to the notion of social contract must be a philosophical one, in the sense that a philosophical point of view allows the possibility of synthesis in contrast to the divided point of view of the social sciences. And indeed "social contract" is a notion of political philosophy, the abstract idea that there is a pact, a compact, an agreement between individuals and the social order. The idea came into existence with the English philosophers of the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes (Levia-
than) and John Locke (Treatise of Government), and the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, chiefly Rousseau with his The Social Contract. The appearance of the idea according to the historians of ideas was a result of the questioning of the old medieval theories concerning the state. According to these theories the state could only be a theocracy, since all authority emanates from God, and kings rule to achieve a divine order, as they are kings by divine right.

Philosophers long before the "social contract" came into existence had their attention fixed on the composition of society. The philosophers were apprentice legislators and rulers. They thought about the best government and the ideal city. Political questions were then asked, taught, and discussed as philosophical questions, politics being a branch of philosophy. There was a narrow margin between their elaborations and utopia, since many of them had been confronted with practical problems: Plato was called to the court of Sicily by Denys the tyrant. Then later on he taught and educated his nephew who was to become a king. Aristotle was the preceptor of Alexander. Plotinus was given the means by another tyrant to construct and create the ideal city, a long-time object of speculation and hope. Being caught in such a close connection between speculation and ruling, the philosophers must have known that there was a utopian limit to their creations. I imagine it thus, because of the trials they had to go through in reality when they approached the throne from too near. In the ninth book of The Republic Socrates and Glaucon discuss the perfect city and its ideal form:

Glaucon: "But the city whose foundation we have been describing has its being only in words; there is no spot on earth where it exists."

Socrates: "No; but it is laid up in heaven as a pattern for him who wills to see, and seeing, to found that city in himself. Whether it exists anywhere, or ever will exist, is no matter."

No wonder then that Rousseau in the opening of his book The Social Contract addresses the reader thus: "I may be asked whether I am a prince or a legislator that I should be writing about politics." And Rousseau, who wanted to distance himself from those he called with contempt the philosophers, says; "I answer no." But several of his propositions were adopted directly, without transformation by the Revolutionary Assembly. These direct connections of the philosophers to tyrants, kings, and political assemblies may seem to us to belong to the domain of the marvelous. However, we can remember how recently President Kennedy asked the members of his
staff to prepare a report on the situation of women. And the initiative of these women gave birth to one of the first detachments of the women’s liberation movement, instigated by persons all very near to the “throne.”

But if, at the start of politics, a philosopher like Aristotle was aware that society was a “combination,” an “association,” a “coming together,” it was not in terms of a voluntary association. For Aristotle society could never be established with the agreement of its members and for their best good, but as the result of a “coup de force,” an imposition of the clever ones upon the bodily strong, but feeble-minded ones. Indeed for Aristotle the strong, the powerful, are those with intelligence, while those possessing bodily strength fall into the category of the weak. In his words:

Essential is the combination of ruler and ruled, the purpose of their coming together being their common safety. For he that can by his intelligence foresee things needed is by nature ruler and master; while he whose bodily strength enables him to perform them is by nature a slave, one of those who are ruled. Thus there is a common interest uniting master and slave. 6

Hobbes and Locke use the terms covenant, compact, agreement, and after them so does Rousseau, while he emphasizes a term much more politically rigorous: the social contract.

Covenant, compact, agreement refer to an initial covenant establishing once and for all the binding of people together. According to Rousseau the social contract is the sum of fundamental conventions which “even though they might never have been formally enunciated are nevertheless implied by living in society.” Clearly, in what Rousseau says, it is the real present existence of the social contract that is particularly stimulating for me—whatever its origin, it exists here and now, and as such it is apt to be understood and acted upon. Each contractor has to reaffirm the contract in new terms for the contract to be in existence.

Only then does it become an instrumental notion in the sense that the contractors are reminded by the term itself that they should reexamine their conditions. Society was not made once and for all. The social contract will yield to our action, to our words. Even if we say no more than Rousseau: “I was born the citizen of a free state and the very right to vote imposes on me the duty to instruct myself in public affairs, however little influence my voice may have in them.”

Rousseau is the first philosopher who does not take it for granted that if there is such a thing as a social contract, its nerve is “might is right” (and under other phraseology belonging to the conscious or the unconscious
order, modern historians and anthropologists seem to yield to the inevitability of this principle in society in the name of science). Nothing is more enjoyable than his sarcasm about the "right of the strongest," which he shows to be a contradiction in terms. In *The Social Contract* he says:

The strongest man is never strong enough to be master all the time. . . . The "right of the strongest"—a "right" that sounds like something intended ironically, but is actually laid down as a principle. . . . To yield to force is an act of necessity not of will; it is at best an act of prudence. In what sense can it be a moral duty? . . . Once might is made to be right, cause and effect are reversed. . . . But, what can be the validity of a right which perishes with the force on which it rests? If force compels obedience, there is no need to invoke a duty to obey, and if force ceases to compel obedience, there is no longer any obligation. Thus the word "right" adds nothing to what is said by "force," it is meaningless.

I come back to the historical situation women are in, and which makes it at least appropriate for them to reflect upon what has affected their existence without their agreement. I am not a prince, I am not a legislator, but an active member of society. I consider it my duty to examine the set of rules, obligations, and constraints this society has placed upon me, if rules and obligations provide me with the freedom I would not find in nature, or if it is not the case to say with Rousseau that society has taken us in, in these terms: "I make a covenant with you which is wholly at your expense and wholly to my advantage; I will respect it so long as I please and you should respect it as long as I wish." (The term is used here rhetorically, since everybody knows that there is no way out of society.) But whether we want it or not, we are living in society here and now, and proof is given that we say yes to the social bond when we conform to the conventions and rules that were never formally enunciated but that nevertheless everybody knows and applies like magic. Proof is given that we say yes to the social bond when we talk a common language as we do now. Most people would not use the term "social contract" to describe their situation within the social order. However, they would agree that there are a certain number of acts and things one "must do." Outlaw and mad are the names for those who refuse to go by the rules and conventions as well as for those who refuse or cannot speak the common language. And this is what interests me when I talk of the social contract: precisely the rules and conventions that have never been formally enunciated, the rules and conventions that go without saying for the scientific mind as well as for the common people, that which for them obviously
makes life possible, exactly as one must have for them two legs and two arms, or one must breathe to live. Being tied together by a social link, we can consider that each and every one of us stands within the social contract—the social contract being then the fact of having come together, of being together, of living as social beings. This notion is relevant for the philosophical mind, even if it is not instrumental anymore for the scientific mind, through the established fact that we live, function, talk, work, marry together. Indeed the conventions and the language show on a dotted line the bulk of the social contract—which consists in living in heterosexuality. For to live in society is to live in heterosexuality. In fact, in my mind social contract and heterosexuality are two superimposable notions.

The social contract I am talking about is heterosexuality.

The problem I am facing in trying to define the social contract is the same kind of problem I have when I try to define what heterosexuality is. I confront a nonexistent object, a fetish, an ideological form which cannot be grasped in reality, except through its effects, whose existence lies in the mind of people, but in a way that affects their whole life, the way they act, they way they move, the way they think. So we are dealing with an object both imaginary and real. If I try to look at the dotted line that delineates the bulk of the social contract, it moves, it shifts, and sometimes it produces something visible, and sometimes it disappears altogether. It looks like the Mobius strip. Now I see this, now I see something quite different. But this Mobius strip is fake, because only one aspect of the optical effect appears distinctly and massively, and that is heterosexuality. Homosexuality appears like a ghost only dimly and sometimes not at all.

What then is heterosexuality? As a term it was created as a counterpart of homosexuality at the beginning of this century. So much for the extent of its "it-goes-without-saying." Jurists would not call it an institution, or in other words, heterosexuality as an institution has no juridic existence (marriage's jurisdiction in French legislation does not even mention that the partners of the contract must be from different sexes). Anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists would come to take it for an institution, but as an unwritten, unspoken one. For they assume a quality of already-there, due to something exterior to a social order, of two groups: men and women. For them, men are social beings, women are natural beings. I compare it to the approach of psychoanalysts when they assume there is a preoedipal relation of the child to the mother, a presocial relation which in spite of its importance for humankind does not emerge from history. This view has for them the advantage in terms of the social contract of doing away with the problem
of origins. They believe that they are dealing with a diachrony instead of a synchrony. So does Lévi-Strauss with his famous notion of the exchange of women. He believes that he deals with invariants. He and all the social scientists who do not see the problem I am trying to underline would of course never talk in terms of "social contract." It is indeed much simpler to take what I call "social contract" in terms of status quo, that is, in terms of something that \textit{has} not changed, \textit{will} not change. Thus we have in their literature these words \textit{fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters,} etc., whose relations can be studied as though they had to go on as such for ever.

Aristotle was much more cynical when he stated in \textit{The Politics} that things \textit{must be}: "The first point is that those which are ineffective without each other \textit{must be} united in a pair. For example, the union of male and female" (emphasis added). Notice that this point of the necessity of heterosexuality is the first point of \textit{The Politics}. And notice also that the second example of "those . . . which \textit{must be} united as a pair" is found in "the combination of ruler and ruled." From that time on male and female, the heterosexual relationship, has been the parameter of all hierarchical relations. It is almost useless to underline that it is only the dominated members of the pair that are "ineffective" by themselves. For "ruler" and "male" go very well without their counterpart.

Now I return to Lévi-Strauss, for I am not going to pass by the idea of the exchange of women, which until now has been so favored by feminist theoreticians. And not by chance, since with this theory we have revealed the whole plot, the whole conspiracy, of fathers, brothers, husbands against half of humankind. For the masters, slaves are certainly more transient than women in the use one can have of them. Women, "the slaves of the poor" as Aristotle called them, are always there at hand; they are the valuables that make life worthwhile according to Lévi-Strauss (Aristotle would have said it not very differently: they make for the "good life"). When Lévi-Strauss described what the exchange of women is and how it works, he was obviously drawing for us the broad lines of the social contract, but a social contract from which women are excluded, a social contract between men. Each time the exchange takes place it confirms between men a contract of appropriation of all women. For Lévi-Strauss, society cannot function or exist without this exchange. By showing it he exposes heterosexuality as not only an institution but as \textit{the} social contract, as a political regime. (You have noticed that sexual pleasure and sexual modes are the question here.) Lévi-Strauss answers the charges of antifeminism which such a theory rewarded him with. And although he conceded that women could not be completely superimposable with the signs of language with which he compared them in
terms of exchange, he had no reason to worry about the shocking effect such a theory can have upon women, any more than Aristotle had when he defined the necessity of the slaves in the social order, because a scientific mind must not be embarrassed and shy when dealing with crude reality. And this is crude reality indeed. There cannot be any fear of a rebellion in the case of women. Even better, they have been convinced that they want what they are forced to do and that they are part of the contract of society that excludes them. Because even if they, if we, do not consent, we cannot think outside of the mental categories of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories. It has sneaked into dialectical thought (or thought of differences) as its main category. For even abstract philosophical categories act upon the real as social. Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. For example, the bodies of social actors are fashioned by abstract language (as well as by nonabstract languages). For there is a plasticity of the real to language.

Thus heterosexuality, whose characteristics appear and then disappear when the mind tries to grasp it, is visible and obvious in the categories of the heterosexual contract. One of them which I tried to deconstruct in a short essay is the category of sex. And it is clear that with it we deal with a political category. A category which when put flatly makes us understand the terms of the social contract for women. I quote from this paper called "The Category of Sex" with slightly revised wording:

The perenniality of the sexes and the perenniality of slaves and masters proceed from the same belief. And as there are no slaves without masters, there are no women without men. The ideology of sexual difference functions as censorship in our culture by masking, on the ground of nature, the social opposition between men and women. Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that the difference is social.

The primacy of difference so constitutes our thought that it prevents turning inward on itself in order to question itself, no matter how necessary that may be to apprehend the bases of that which precisely constitutes it.

The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual. As such it does not concern being but relationships (for women and men are the result of relationships), although the two aspects are always confused when they are discussed. The category of sex is the one that rules as "natural" the relation that is at the base of
(heterosexual) society and through which half of the population, women, are “heterosexualized” (the making of women is like the making of eunuchs, the breeding of slaves, of animals) and submitted to a hetero-
sexual economy.

For heterosexuality is a totalitarian order which to prove true has its inquisitions, its courts, its tribunals, its body of laws, its terrors, its tortures, its mutilations, its executions, its police. It shapes the mind as well as the body since it controls all mental production. It grips our minds in such a way that we cannot think outside of it.

Its main category, the category of sex, works specifically, as “black” does, through an operation of reduction, by taking the part for the whole, a part (color, sex) through which the whole human being has to pass as through a screen. (Emphasis added)

When Adrienne Rich said “heterosexuality is compulsory,” it was a step forward in the comprehension of the kind of social contract we are dealing with. Nicole-Claude Mathieu, a French anthropologist, in a remarkable essay on consciousness, made it clear that it is not because we remain silent that we consent. And how can we consent to a social contract that reduces us, by obligation, to sexual beings meaningful only through their reproductive activities or, to quote the French writer Glaucon, to beings in whom everything, even their minds, is sex?

In conclusion I will say that only by running away from their class can women enter the social contract (that is, a new one), even if they have to do it like the fugitive serfs, one by one. We are doing it. Lesbians are runaways, maroon slaves, runaway wives are the same case, and they exist in all countries, because the political regime of heterosexuality represents all cultures. So that breaking off the heterosexual social contract is a necessity for those who do not consent to it. For if there is something real in the ideas of Rousseau, it is that we can form “voluntary associations” here and now, and here and now reformulate the social contract as a new one, although we are not princes or legislators. Is this mere utopia? Then I will stay with Socrates’s view and also Glaucon’s: If ultimately we are denied a new social order, which therefore can exist only in words, I will find it in myself.

Notes


5. This statement by Marx and Engels is particularly relevant to the modern situation.