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Harriet Martineau And The Sociology Of The American South

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Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) was the first significant woman sociologist, and was also the first methodologically competent sociologist to make systematic observations throughout the American South. Martineau’s writings on American society in the 1830s provide an enduring model of observational dedication and perseverance. Of the two and a half years that Martineau devoted to data collection in the U.S., she allotted six months to direct observation and face-to-face interviews in the southern states. From late December 1834 to early July 1835, Martineau completed first-hand observations in Maryland, the District of Columbia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky (Map 1).

Bereft of grant money, lacking airlines, automobiles, and paved roads, and without McDonald’s, Hilton Hotels, or air conditioning, Martineau and her research assistant, Louisa Jeffreys, traversed the American South via river boats and horse-drawn coaches. I find this remarkable. How

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1 Presented to the American Sociological Assn. Annual Meeting in the Section on the History of Sociology Paper Session: Exploring Our Diverse Disciplinary Roots, August 16, 2003, Hilton Atlanta. Hill is an interdisciplinary social scientist holding earned doctorates in sociology (1989) and geography (1982). He is immediate past chair of the ASA Section on the History of Sociology and was awarded the annual Harriet Martineau Sociological Society Award in 2003. Hill currently edits of his own journal, Sociological Origins, devoted to research, documentation and critique in the history of sociology.

Map 1. Martineau’s Southern Circuit

many American sociologists today have logged two and a half years of intensive, unfunded field study of the society they live in, let alone in a foreign country?
I have, on occasion, when discussing Martineau, been reminded by well-meaning colleagues, “Yes, and you know, Max Weber once visited the United States”– as if this fact is important relative to Martineau. Yes, Weber presented a paper at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis.³ Yes, Weber spent a few weeks visiting relatives, but he conducted no systematic social research. There is no substantive equivalence between the American visits of Martineau and Weber.

The other challenge to the significance of Martineau’s sociological visit is raised by those who genuflect before the name of Alexis de Tocqueville. He toured the U.S. in 1831, three years before Martineau.⁴ Elsewhere, I have detailed the severe biases and methodological shortcomings of Tocqueville’s “observations.”⁵ Ostensibly, Martineau and Tocqueville covered much the same territory (Map 2), but Tocqueville was so methodologically flawed that his “conclusions” must be judged irreparably corrupt – and thus I repeat my claim: Harriet Martineau was the first methodologically competent sociologist to make systematic observations throughout the American South.

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Map 2: Martineau & Tocqueville – Southern Routes
Martineau’s detailed accounts of life and institutions in the American South are found today in substantial sections of her major publications: *Society in America* (1837)⁶, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838)⁷, and her *Autobiography* (1877)⁸. Much archival and library work remains, however, before any portrait of Martineau’s travels can be considered complete.⁹ Two potential sources merit exploration: newspapers and personal letters. Martineau was well-known in the U.S. and public notice was taken wherever she went. Her biographer, Maria Chapman, put it thus:

No English traveller had before visited the country with so brilliant a prestige.

She brought out such a reputation for leaning as well as genius, for piety as well as power, for trained critical ability as well as natural observing faculty, for thorough knowledge of England as well as kindly dispositions towards America . . . .¹⁰

Systematic searches of southern newspapers and periodicals are likely to reveal valuable references to Martineau’s movements, contacts, and activities. Further, it was Martineau’s practice to write “thank you” letters to her hosts and hostesses, and while some of these letters are known, others probably lie undiscovered in southern archival repositories. We can hope also that Martineau’s personal journal may someday surface. “Her journal,” wrote Chapman, “is a full memorandum of facts, events, statistics,

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experiences, and all those special ‘happenings’ of which some persons have to a proverb more than others; and she was one of those who have most.”¹¹ Chapman records snippets from Martineau’s journal, but the sociological record will owe a larger debt to the researcher who someday discovers Martineau’s journal – although, unfortunately, there exists the real possibility that the journal was destroyed.¹²

The scope of Martineau’s southern circuit was succinctly recounted by Chapman:¹³

[S]he stayed three weeks in Baltimore before establishing herself at Washington for the session of Congress. While in the capital of the nation, she was earnestly sought by all the eminent men of all parties among senators, representatives, and judges of the Supreme Court, and was on terms of friendship and intimacy with the leading minds of the whole Union. She enjoyed the advantage of intimate and confidential intercourse with a class of men of whom none now remain, – the founders of the Republic and their immediate successors. She was in Richmond while the Virginia Legislature was in session, and then made a long winter journey through North and South Carolina. Thence she traversed the State of Georgia to Augusta, and from that capital to Montgomery, Alabama, descending the river afterwards to Mobile. Her route led thence to New Orleans and up the Mississippi and Ohio to Nashville, Tennessee, on the Cumberland River, and to Lexington, averaging a fortnight in each place. After visiting the wonderful Mammoth Cave in Kentucky she descended the Ohio to Cincinnati, and

¹¹ Maria Weston Chapman, Memorials of Harriet Martineau (Boston, Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1877: 228-229).

¹² Martineau eventually asked her correspondents to destroy her letters, and many complied. A similar fate may well have befallen Martineau’s personal journal.

¹³ Memorials, pp. 226-227.
after making a visit of ten days there, and again ascending that river, she landed in
Virginia, visiting all the natural wonders and beauties of the region.

During these long travels, Martineau made continuous observations and recorded them in her journal. On making such journals, Martineau maintained:

> Whether the regularity be pleasant or not, . . . the entries ought to be made daily, if possible. The loss incurred by delay is manifest to any one who has tried. . . . In the midst of his weariness and unwillingness to take out his pen, the traveller may comfort himself by remembering that he will reap the reward of diligence in satisfaction when he gets home.\(^\text{14}\)

No one can fault Martineau on diligence, and her sociological labors are especially rewarding in *Society in American* and *Retrospect of Western Travel*.\(^\text{15}\) Her observations on American social institutions are systematic, comprehensive, and logically analyzed. Among her principal conclusions was the finding that Americans often lay claim to higher ethical standards than they, in fact, achieve in day-to-day life. That is to say, she described how Americans often claim one thing abstractly while doing virtually the opposite concretely.\(^\text{16}\) For Martineau, this schism between self-serving discourse and observed social patterns was nowhere more striking than between the ethical and democratic planks of the U.S.


\(^{15}\) *Op. cit.*

\(^{16}\) This astute insight remains today the methodological bugaboo of contemporary sociological research that relies in whole or substantial part on survey questionnaire data – the survey taps only what people say they do, not what they can actually be observed to do. Thus, the continuing relevance of one of Martineau’s central methodological dicta: “The grand secret of wise inquiry into Morals and Manners is to begin with the study of THINGS, using the DISCOURSE OF PERSONS as a commentary upon them” (Martineau, *How to Observe*, sesquicentennial edition, p. 73). Elsewhere, I have identified the epistemological qualities of Martineau’s methodology (see Michael R. Hill, “Empiricism and Reason in Harriet Martineau’s Sociology,” in Martineau’s *How to Observe*, sesquicentennial edition, pp. xv-lx).
Martineau considered Washington an artificial and unlikable place, surmising, “The city is a great mistake” (Retrospect of Western Travel, p. 160).

Martineau had no personal sympathy with slavery, but neither did she join the abolitionist cause initially. Martineau’s views on slavery were complex, and transcended simple condemnation. She wrote:

[T]he most infantile men mistake the means of human happiness, and the wisest have but a dim and fluctuating perception of them: but yet all men entertain one common conviction, that what makes people happy is good and right, and that what makes them miserable is evil and wrong. This conviction is at the bottom of practices which seem the most inconsistent with it. . . . When the Georgian planter buys and sells slaves, he goes on the supposition that he is preserving the order and due subordination of society. All these notions are shown by philosophy to be narrow, superficial, and mistaken. They have been outgrown by many, and are doubtless destined to be outgrown by all; but, acted upon by the ignorant and deluded, they are very different from the wickedness which is perpetrated against better knowledge.

Martineau, understanding the evil of slavery both in terms of the backward slaveholder and in terms of her own principled abhorrence of slavery, argued for the potential enlightenment of the southern gentry and, over time, increasingly championed the abolitionist position.

Martineau and Jeffreys charted their course through the American South shortly before leaving Washington, DC.\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) Martineau considered Washington an artificial and unlikable place, surmising, “The city is a great mistake” (Retrospect of Western Travel, p. 160).
There was no end to the kind cautions given me against travelling through the Southern States, not only on account of my opinions on slavery, but because of the badness of the roads and the poverty of the wayside accommodations. There was so much of this, that my companion and I held a consultation one day, in our room at Washington, spreading out the map, and surveying the vast extent of country we proposed to traverse before meeting my relatives at New-Orleans. . . . We had friends to visit at Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina; Augusta, Georgia; Montgomery, Alabama; and Mobile. At Richmond we were cautioned about the journey into South Carolina; at Charleston we were met with dreadful reports of travelling in Georgia; in Georgia people spoke of the horrors of Alabama, and so on; and, after all, nothing could well be easier than the whole undertaking. I do not remember a single difficulty that occurred all the way.¹⁸ There was fatigue, of course. . . . Throughout the journey we were obliged to accommodate ourselves to the stage hours, setting off sometimes in the evening, sometimes at midnight; or, of all uncomfortable seasons, at two or three in the morning.

Martineau intentionally took roads less traveled, and, simultaneously, oriented herself in unique ways to the social geography of the more frequented places along her route. For example, on adding the University of Virginia to her itinerary, she wrote: “The existence of the University of Virginia is scarcely recognised by British travellers. I was welcomed there as the first who had ever visited it.

¹⁸ Subsequent threats against her life, due to her increasingly staunch abolitionist position, were judged sufficiently serious to dissuade her from making a planned side trip into Missouri. Overall, the greatest sustained hostility that Martineau encountered during her travels came from anti-abolitionists in Northern cities.
Retrospect, p. 199. And, whenever possible, Martineau oriented herself to new cities by viewing them from the highest possible vantage points. She recommended:

It would be wise in travellers to make it their first business in a foreign city to climb the loftiest point they can reach, so as to have the scene they are to explore laid out as in a living map beneath them. It is scarcely credible how much time is saved and confusion of ideas obviated by these means. I gained much by mounting . . . the new hotel at Baltimore, the Capitol in Washington, . . . the college at Lexington, the hill where the Statehouse is to be at Nashville, the Cotton-press at New Orleans, and [the] church steeple at Charleston.20

For the full details, flavor and sociological import of Martineau’s observations in the South, one must read and study them ensemble, for any brief quotation necessarily fails to represent the whole. The following two excerpts provide, not summaries, but exemplars, to prompt your further reading. Of Southern society generally, Martineau surmised:

I think I never was in society in any of the Southern cities without being asked what I would do if I had a legacy of slaves, or told, in vindictiveness or sorrow, that the prosperity of the North was obtained at the expense of the South. I was never in Southern society without perceiving that its characteristic is a want of repose. It is restlessly gay or restlessly sorrowful. It is angry or exulting; it is hopeful or apprehensive. It is never content; never in such a state of calm satisfaction as to forget itself. The peculiarity poisons the satisfaction of the stranger in the midst of the free and joyous hospitality to which he would otherwise surrender himself with inconsiderate

19 Retrospect, p. 199.
20 Retrospect, p. 228.
delight. While everything is done that can be conceived of to make you happy, there is a weight pulling at your heartstrings, because you see that other hearts are heavy, and the nobler the heavier.

The ponderous social tensions, wrought fundamentally by the institution of slavery, became such that it was in the rural natural beauty of the South that Martineau found her greatest joys. For example:

The American can conceive of nothing more dismal than a pine-barren on a rainy day; but the profound tranquillity made it beautiful to me, whose rainy days have been almost all spent in cities, amid the rumbling of hackney-coaches, the clink of pattens, the gurgle of spouts, and the flitting by of umbrellas. It is very different in the pine-barrens. . . . the pines stand meekly drooping, as if waiting to be fed; the drip is noiseless; . . . When the rain ceases towards evening, . . . the redbird startles the eye; the butterflies come abroad in clouds; the frogs grow noisy, and all nature wakens up fresh as from her siesta.  

The crushing reality of slavery, however, and its systemic consequences, everywhere pressed in on Martineau.

Suffice it to say that Martineau’s observations convinced her of the absolute moral necessity to “take sides,” to support the American abolitionist movement. Martineau’s subsequent writings on slavery and the social, political, economic, and moral dimensions of its abolition, are not only voluminous but are also emotionally forceful, ethically powerful, and logically rigorous. The proof of this, of course, is in the reading. As sociologists, we are fortunate that Deborah Logan, of the Department of English at Western Kentucky University, has redently presented us with an exemplary

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collection of Martineau’s *Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2002). Yet, Logan’s compilation by no means exhausts the whole of Martineau’s abolitionist corpus. For example, Martineau wrote dozens upon dozens of related articles for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (published in the United States) and the *Daily News* (published in London), but Logan was allowed space for only a handful of these. In sum, Martineau’s intensive, systematic, first-hand observations in the American South provided an enduring impetus for a subsequent and massive outpouring of accessible, socially engaged and sociologically astute writing.

As a concluding aside, I am obligated to remark that it has become perversely fashionable in a few quarters to disparage Martineau’s contributions to the discipline of sociology. All I can reasonably say in Martineau’s defense is that such detractors are woefully ill-informed; they tend neither to the prodigious amount and wide scope of Martineau’s works nor read what little they do address with sociological insight or intellectual sophistication. To those few who strangely dismiss Martineau as racist, I say *read* Logan’s compilation of Martineau’s *Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War*. To others who curiously argue that Martineau is not *really* feminist, I say *read* Gayle Graham Yates’ edited collection, *Harriet Martineau on Women*. To anyone who claims that Martineau is not a sociological heavyweight of the first magnitude, I say you try translating and condensing Auguste Comte’s *Positive Philosophy*. To anyone suggesting that Martineau was simply intuitive rather than

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rigorously analytical, I say study her deductively-framed explication of political economy in *The Moral of Many Fables*.\(^{26}\) To any who challenge Martineau’s methodological sophistication, I say read Martineau on *How to Observe Morals and Manners*.\(^{27}\) To those who doubt the empirical veracity of Martineau’s observations, I say, compare her methods, side-by-side, point for point, with those employed by any other social observer of her era. To those contending that Martineau was derivative and unoriginal, I say read the full texts of Martineau’s *Society in America* and *Retrospect of Western Travel*.\(^{28}\) To those accusing Martineau of callous indifference to working people, I say study her actual behavior and attend to her stated views on the moral and ethical responsibilities of the landed gentry, of governments and legislators, and of factory owners and capitalists generally. And, to those who might now in exasperation say, “But, Martineau is not *perfect*,” I reply, “Show me *one* other sociologist, male or female, classical or modern, who *is* ‘perfect,’ and I will grant your fantastic premise.” And finally, to any weak-kneed post-modern relativist who chides that Martineau was morally uncompromising, intellectually scrupulous, indelibly scientific, tenaciously empiricist, and unambiguously self-confident, I say: “*At last*, you are on to something!”

As to future research, allow me to note that an interdisciplinary working seminar on Harriet Martineau is planned for early June, 2005, at Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky – one of the sites visited by Martineau during her travels.\(^{29}\) This event, sponsored by the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society, will undoubtedly shed additional light on Martineau’s contributions to the social sciences and


\(^{27}\) *Op. cit.*

\(^{28}\) *Op. cit.*

her understanding of the sociology of the American South, and I hope that some of you, at least, can join us.  

30 For further information on the HMSS Mammoth Cave Working Seminar, contact Deborah A. Logan (deborah.logan@wku.edu) or Michael R. Hill (mhill@iwcc.edu).