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## Harriet Martineau (1802-1876)

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## HARRIET MARTINEAU (1802–1876)

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Harriet Martineau authored the first systematic methodological treatise in sociology, conducted extended international comparative studies of social institutions, and translated Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* into English, thus structurally facilitating the introduction of sociology and positivism into the United States. In her youth she was a professional writer who captured the popular English mind by wrapping social scientific instruction in a series of widely read short novels. In her maturity she was an astute sociological theorist, methodologist, and analyst of the first order. To the extent that any complex institutional phenomenon such as sociology can have identifiable founders, Alice Rossi\* (1973, 118–124) justly celebrates Harriet Martineau as “the first woman sociologist.”

### BIOGRAPHY

The major data source on Martineau's life is her *Autobiography*, written in 1855, but published posthumously in 1877 together with Maria Chapman's biographically important *Memorials of Harriet Martineau*. Martineau (1877; 1985, 35–49) also prepared her own obituary notice, and it contains a self-estimate of her work. Martineau's personal experiences are reflected in her *Household Education* (1849), *Life in the Sick-Room* (1844), and “Berkeley the Banker,” one of the didactic novels in her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–1834). A selection of her private correspondence is also available (Martineau 1983). Martineau's modern biographers typically emphasize themes of particular interest to students of English literature rather than sociology. Several such accounts (e.g., Pichanick 1980) are found in most university libraries.

Harriet Martineau, born 1802, was the sixth of eight children in a middle-

class English family. Her younger brother, James, was a well-known cleric (Jackson 1901). Her father's occupation as a manufacturer placed Harriet in comfortable surroundings. Her childhood was marred, however, by strong feelings of fearfulness and self-doubt. She was nonetheless intellectually industrious, and applied herself to both secular and religious studies. She was educated largely at home, with the exception of two years in private, coeducational classes and a year in a boarding school for girls. Through self-study she rigorously augmented her early exposure to subjects routinely taught only to males. University study was barred to women, but Martineau maintained a regimen of intense, self-directed investigation throughout her life. Troubled by increasing deafness as a child, Martineau required an ear trumpet during adulthood.

The Martineau family suffered severe economic losses in the 1820s, when Harriet's father died. Harriet was left to her own resources. While Harriet faced the exigencies of earning her living in a patriarchal society, she wrote: "I began to feel the blessing of a wholly new freedom" (Martineau 1877, I: 108). Martineau escaped the confines of middle-class Victorian marriage when her fiancé unexpectedly died. She remained happily single and independent for the rest of her life. She successfully supported herself as an author in various forms, including essays, tracts, reviews, novels, travelogues, biographies, how-to manuals, journal articles, newspaper columns, histories, children's stories, and sociologically informed nonfiction.

Martineau's life is a chronicle of intellectual maturation and deepening sociological insight. Raised as a devout Unitarian, Martineau's first literary efforts were fervently religious. Adoption of "Necessarianism" provided her with an intellectual bridge to a social scientific perspective, and the *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–1834) signaled her departure from ecclesiastical dogma. In the *Illustrations* she used fiction to explicate the principles of the new science of political economy, and the results met with popular success. She lived in London during this period, and her intellectual circle came to include Charles Babbage, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, Charles Dickens, Thomas Malthus, William Wordsworth, Charlotte Bronte, Charles Lyell, and Charles Darwin. The *Illustrations* marked her entry into English literary society and set her on the road to financial independence.

In 1834 Martineau began a two-year study tour of the United States. She reported her observations in *Society in America* (1837) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838a). These empirical studies emerged hand in hand with her foundational treatise on sociological data collection. *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838b) insightfully articulated the principles and methods of empirical social research. This period marked Martineau's achievement of a mature and incisive sociological imagination.

In subsequent years Martineau refined her metatheoretical orientation and moved even farther from her Unitarian upbringing. After a trip to the Middle East, reported in *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848), she openly embraced atheism (cf., Atkinson and Martineau 1851). In 1851 she began an English

translation/condensation of Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*. The introduction of positivist sociological ideas into the United States was greatly facilitated by Martineau's momentous rendition of Comte's (1853) most influential sociological work.

By choice, Martineau's later years unfolded not in London, but in the Lake District, where she built a house at Ambleside. She paid off her mortgage with royalties from her controversial *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (Atkinson and Martineau 1851). The beauty and peacefulness of the Lake District stand in strong contrast to the years of personal trial, illness, exhaustion, deafness, and social and literary controversy that confronted Martineau throughout most of her life.

For Martineau, her profession was a Weberian calling:

Authorship has never been for me a matter of choice. I have not done it for amusement, or for money, or for fame, or for any reason but because I could not help it. Things were pressing to be said; and there was more or less evidence that I was the person to say them. (Martineau 1877, I: 143)

Martineau, like all significant sociological theorists, gave life and direction to vital intellectual questions with insight, originality, and a deep sense of personal and social mission. Harriet Martineau died at seventy-four years of age, in 1876.

## MAJOR THEMES

Compiling a list of the topics to which Martineau turned her prolific pen is no small task. Joseph Rivlin's (1947) comprehensive bibliography lists dozens of separately published books. The 3,479 pages of the *Illustrations of Political Economy* alone were originally published in twenty-five installments. There is no thorough bibliography of Martineau's reviews and journal articles (several early articles are reprinted in her *Miscellanies* [1836] and a selection of later articles appears in her *Health, Husbandry, and Handicraft* [1861]). As a journalist, Martineau wrote more than 1,500 newspaper columns (Webb 1959). Martineau's written corpus is a massive reservoir awaiting modern sociological critique.

Martineau undertook pioneering studies—substantive, theoretical, and methodological studies—in what is now called sociology. She was an ardent Unitarian, abolitionist, critic, feminist, social scientist, and avowed atheist. Her writing topics included biography, disability, education, history, husbandry, legislation, manufacturing, mesmerism, occupational health, philosophy, political economy, religion, research techniques, slavery, sociology, travel, and women's rights.

Of Martineau's numerous works, *Society in America* (1837) is the most widely known to sociologists in the United States. Her methodological strategy confronted the problem of ethnocentrism. Rather than compare the United States with England, she identified the moral principles to which Americans claimed

allegiance, and compared them with observable social patterns—a methodologically insightful distinction between rhetoric and reality. Martineau documented a wide chasm between extant institutional patterns and the values of democracy, justice, equality, and freedom that Americans claimed to cherish. Beyond *Society in America*, Martineau's other economic, political, and historical studies remain largely uncited by sociologists. Her systematic observations of society are directly relevant to historical and comparative sociologists who would unravel the complexities of Victorian England and nineteenth-century life generally.

In *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838b) Martineau provided the first-known systematic methodological treatise in sociology. It is a theoretically sophisticated, yet practical guide to sociological observation. Metatheoretically, she offered the classic positivist solution to the correspondence problem between intersubjectively verifiable observables and unobservable theoretical entities. Confronting the problem of studying a society as a whole, she creatively attacked problems of bias, generalization, samples, reactivity, interviews, corroboration, and data-recording techniques. She outlined studies of the major social institutions, including religion, education, family, arts and popular culture, markets and economy, prisons, government, and philanthropy. *How to Observe* also is a precedent-setting work of theory. Before Karl Marx, and decades before Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, Martineau sociologically examined social class, forms of religion, types of suicide, national character, domestic relations and the status of women, delinquency and criminology, and the intricate interrelations between repressive social institutions and the individual (Hill 1989).

Thematic study of Martineau's extensive corpus provides a wealth of untapped opportunities for modern sociologists. For example, it is well known that Martineau translated Comte's (1853) major sociological treatise, but the metasociology of Martineau's condensation still awaits modern analysis. Her contributions to feminist thought (Martineau 1985) deserve sociological review. Martineau's *England and Her Soldiers* (1859) is an uncited tour de force on occupational health, and she provides detailed portraits of nineteenth-century industrial and agricultural practices in *Health, Husbandry, and Handicraft* (1861). Her *Illustrations of Political Economy* and other didactic tales are untapped models of literature as sociology (cf., Bonser 1929; Hill 1987). Thematically, Martineau's sociological imagination was unbounded; it reached from micro to macro, from theory to observation, from objective description to informed critique.

## CRITIQUES OF HARRIET MARTINEAU

The early precedence of Martineau's work has long been ignored by the patriarchal historians of sociology. In a survey of the "continuities among women as subjects and objects of intellectual work," Shulamit Reinharz (1989, 92) notes:

There were the continuities of not being remembered—e.g., the fame of de Tocqueville vis a vis Harriet Martineau, although both wrote at the same time about the same topic; and the fame of Durkheim's treatise on method as compared to Martineau's although hers predates his by sixty years and is nearly analogous.

Martineau was forgotten, not only in sociology, but also, to large extent, in the disciplines of literature, history, and journalism. Spender (1982) critically addresses this issue, and correctly faults the male academic establishment for the patriarchal exclusion of Martineau's work from sociology.

Paul Riedesel's (1981) apologetic exemplifies the patriarchal bias. He seriously discounted Martineau even while calling attention to her work. He claimed that Martineau "left no corpus of theory" but failed to cite Martineau's sophisticated methodological classic *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (Riedesel 1981, 77). At best, such essays damn with faint praise.

Seymour Martin Lipset (1962, 39), who otherwise admired Martineau's sociological skills, suggested that "to those who wonder why such a sophisticated analyst has been allowed to linger for so long in the obscurity of nineteenth-century editions, the answer must be that the blame rests with Harriet Martineau herself." Lipset implied that Martineau was overlooked only because she wrote lengthy works that are "tedious to some readers." Thus liberal patriarchs defend the male academy for dismissing the reality, rigor, and precedence of Martineau's accomplishments.

The patriarchal negation of Martineau's foundational work is crosscut by disciplinary complexities and exceptions. For example, it was a male literary critic, Thomas Gillian (1985, 33), who said of Martineau's *How to Observe Morals and Manners*: "Written in an atypically verbose style, it is not much more than a lengthy essay that anticipates many of the observations she would make about American institutions and social mores." Similarly, it was a female literary critic, Valerie Pichanick (1980, 75), who also vastly underrated Martineau's scientific acumen when she credited Martineau with having outlined nothing more than a "primitive" sociological methodology.

On the other hand, it was a male sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset (1962, 37), who concluded that *How to Observe Morals and Manners* "testifies to the considerable sophistication" that Martineau brought to methodological issues. A male literary historian, Robert K. Webb, wrote critically of Martineau's literary style (Webb 1960), but nonetheless laboriously compiled the virtually irreplaceable index to Martineau's hundreds of newspaper articles (Webb 1959). And to Joseph Rivlin (1947) all scholars are indebted for his meticulous bibliographic description of Martineau's separately published books. If most males have erased Martineau from the received canon, there are other scholars—men and women—who help keep her name alive.

James Terry (1983, 253) argues that Martineau and Charlotte Perkins Gilman\* are "two women who have been excluded from the sociological canon whom I consider on a par with the traditional masters." He concludes that Martineau's

“writings in political economy and scientific methods, her comparative study of American and European societies, and her insights into the subordination of women in American society in the 1830s deserve recognition and study in their own right” (Terry 1983, 253–254). Terry recommends inclusion of Martineau’s work in the basic sociology curriculum.

Seymour Martin Lipset (1962) astutely summarized the major theses and arguments in *Society in America*. He pointed out that “in emphasizing the value system as a causal agent, Martineau was an early precursor of one of the major sociological orientations, an approach that attempts to analyze the effect of values on structure and change” (Lipset 1962, 10). On the publication of Lipset’s abridged edition of Martineau’s *Society in America*, John Cawelti (1963, 208) characterized Martineau as a Victorian combination of Margaret Mead and Hannah Arendt.\* Comparing her work with de Tocqueville’s well-known studies of the same era, Cawelti credited Martineau with providing a viable alternative analysis of “the pressure toward conformity” in American society. Her analysis, he concluded, suggests further “avenues of approach to the problem that are surely worthy of investigation by historians and sociologists” (Cawelti 1963, 213).

Edith Abbott\* (1906, 615) attributed “the most convenient and definite statement regarding the early employment of women” in the United States to Martineau (cf., 1837, II: 131–151). Mary van Kleeck\* (1913, 18) cited Martineau’s data on women bookbinders in van Kleeck’s landmark study of the bookbinding industry. Abbott, however, faulted Martineau’s accounting of the occupations open to women, and argued that Martineau’s underreporting of occupational possibilities for women lent unintended support to “comforting generalizations regarding the multiplication of industrial openings for women” in the decades subsequent to Martineau’s report (Abbott 1906, 616). Nonetheless, Abbott appreciatively noted Martineau’s perceptive and critical conclusion that “it is difficult . . . for women to earn their bread.” Abbott wrote that “one could not go far wrong in saying that the lot of the poor woman is still sad. Opportunity of employment is scarce now as it was then” (Abbott 1906, 626).

Finally, it must be remembered that Auguste Comte was extremely pleased with Martineau’s translation/abridgment of his foundational *Cours de philosophie positive*. He wrote to her:

And looking at it from the point of view of future generations, I feel sure that your name will be linked with mine, for you have executed the only one of those works that will survive amongst all those which my fundamental treatise has called forth. (Comte, quoted in Harrison 1913, xvii–xviii)

In the hands of subsequent male sociologists, Comte’s prophesy of Martineau’s fame went unfulfilled. As a result, the available major interpretations of Martineau have been authored primarily by scholars in disciplines other than sociology (recent examples include Deirdre David [1987] and Linda Peterson [1986]).

These interesting, but asociological works pose a challenge to modern sociologists. Whatever the value of Martineau's work to literature, history, journalism, women's studies, and other disciplines, the evaluation of her original contributions to *sociology* requires sustained, intelligent critique by sociologically sensitive scholars. To this end, Abbott (1906), Bonser (1929), Cawelti (1963), Hill (1987, 1989), Lipset (1962), Rossi (1973), Spender (1982), and Terry (1983) provide points of departure for more thorough explications of Martineau's metasociological framework, sociological theories, methodologies, and empirical findings, analyses, and social critiques.

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