



## *Small Victories, Lasting Change* **Harriet Martineau, Slavery, and Women's Rights**

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**Abstract:** Harriet Martineau's careful methodology, both theoretical and applied, makes her one of the founders of sociology. This essay discusses her three volume work, *Society in America*. It focuses on Martineau's methodology as applied to issues of slavery and women's rights in the United States circa 1832-1834.

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### INTRODUCTION

Harriet Martineau was a unique woman. She faced a variety of obstacles: multiple deaths of close relations, including her nephew, brother, father and fiancé; her gender; and her deafness. Being a woman in Victorian England was not an easy situation. To be a woman writer, slowly challenging gender stereotypes, was even harder. Despite these hardships, Martineau was able to become a prolific writer, an educator, and an important voice on significant causes. Most critically, Martineau contributed to the founding of sociology, particularly with her well-planned methodology. This essay will explore her unique methodological approach to the study of society, and then examples of how she applied this particular method to specific cases. The essay will focus primarily on her three-volume work, *Society in America*.

Martineau was a prolific writer. She wrote novels, political and social theory

texts. She wrote religious and spiritual texts dealing with Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Martineau penned history texts on India and England, and essays on health and mysticism. She wrote a series for children and even translated Auguste Comte's seminal work, "Positive Philosophy." This is pertinent because in writing on a variety of topics, she became a well-rounded thinker. However, some people see her lack of focus on a unified subject as a detraction from her legacy.

Indeed, Martineau is not without controversy. In this respect, Mary Jo Deegan makes writes, "Since Martineau is sometimes dismissed as a neurotic, white, middle class, privileged woman, it is important to see that she achieved her high status after she conquered and confronted her multiple disadvantages" (Deegan 2001: 59). We will explore some possible reasons for Martineau's fall into obscurity.

Despite her range of interests, many critics argued her work lacked theoretical sophistication. She was writing in newspa-

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pers and primers geared towards basic readers, and some of her theory was overlooked because of the medium. Martineau also wrote over a period of decades, and was not easily connected to a sole issue. These factors contribute to her relative obscurity. Until recently, many modern critics dismissed her, in some instances due to problems with her prose.

She never revised, and although some of her writing is lively and brilliant, some of it is very dull. She can be credited with neither painstaking attention to craft nor stylistic grace. [Martineau] was full of contradictions, at times the advance messenger of a new movement, at times a reflector of Victorian eccentric views and narrow morality, sometimes farsighted, other times petty, sometimes mean, other times generous and wise, occasionally brilliant, but often verbose, repetitious and tedious. (Yates, 1985:18-19)

Another reason Martineau was dismissed is her gender. As stated earlier, the gender conventions of Victorian England were stifling. As Bohrer points out,

The established social, economic and political structures uphold and depend on their own definitions and elaborations of difference. Harriet Martineau by her public presence and her renown as an author, not only threatened to rattle the structures supporting the ideological assumptions about the 'normal' role for women, her insistence upon reinterpreting the notion of separate spheres had the potential to destabilize the political, social and economic institutions that depend on normative gender patterns as the premise for women's

disenfranchisement. (Bohrer, 2003: 24)

From this we can better understand how Martineau threatened the established social structure of England by her writings. If women could be equally strong thinkers as men, then the rationale for oppressing women would fall away.

A final reason that Martineau may have been dismissed is her disability. At the age of twelve, she began to go deaf. At fifteen, she was almost completely deaf. Subsequently, she used an ear trumpet and speaking tube to amplify what little hearing she had left. Thus, many critics argued that Martineau was not a valid social observer because of her disability. Critics also argued that her deafness impacted the quality of information received from her sources. They believed that when one spoke through a trumpet, they would necessarily be more careful with their statements. Martineau saw things differently.

Her hearing device elevates her above tourists, travel writers and male journalists as her use of the trumpet promotes confidences through the intimacy of conversation. She asserts that her use of the speaking tube 'seems to exert some winning power, by which I gain more in *tête-à-têtes* than is given to people who have general conversation'. (Bohrer 2003: 26)

So in sum, her gender, her disability, and her choice to write for the masses seem to have contributed to Martineau's relative obscurity. Harriet Martineau's instructive and once well known analysis *Society in America*, is today largely uncited and unappreciated by most mainline scholars and popular pundits alike. However, as many third-wave feminists have re-examined history and found new role models, Martineau reemerged as a relevant figure.

## METHODOLOGY

Methodology is a critical part of being a valid social scientist. With the right methods, it is easier to see patterns and make sense of complicated social ideas. More importantly, if one doesn't have a strong methodology, it can compromise and taint research. Martineau was very good at establishing rules for observing and then sticking to them. This is in contrast to someone such as Comte, who had brilliant plans for his methodology, but oftentimes he did not follow what he professed to believe. Indeed, he mostly stayed at a metaphysical, abstract level, and did not apply his methods to reality. In contrast, Martineau's methodology is perhaps her strongest legacy to the sociological cannon.

In her book *Society in America*, we can see how strong observations can enhance a story.

She deemed it important to study what a society professes to believe in as a foundation for determining its success. This is pertinent because by studying a society through its own standards, bias is minimized to the extent it can be. In *Society in America*, Martineau is not comparing the United States to an arbitrary standard, or imposing her own tastes in the matter. She is judging the society by what it claims to stand for.

Her other method is to give exact dates, full descriptions, and how she obtained her information. In this way, Martineau is establishing a scientific method applied to society. She admits her biases and establishes a clear standard for how to look at the information gathered in research. She is not saying that we must believe her based on her extensive experience. She is instead noting the information and letting us determine if her method is sound. In this way, Martineau was truly a sociologist, inasmuch as sociology is a social science. Before Martineau came to the United States, she read

everything she could about it. This is a good practice. Martineau also details her extensive travel route in the preface. She visits every state at least once, and many she visits multiple times.

She spent two years in the United States, seeing various walks of life and social classes. As Bohrer points out,

In *Society in America*, Martineau assures her readers that her access to domestic life renders her better prepared than most to address American social, political and economic issues than male travelers who remain excluded from the revelations and truths afforded by intimate views and intimate conversations. (Bohrer, 2003: 27)

It is important to underline that, because Martineau interacted with such a broad spectrum of people, because she engages both Native Americans and African Americans, and because she dealt with different socio-economic groups, she gradually acquired an extensive knowledge about the people of the United States.

Martineau recounts meeting plantation owners in *Society in America*. As a keen methodologist, she is careful to plan for conflicts:

I made it a rule to allow others to introduce the subject of slavery, knowing that they would not fail to do so, and that I might learn as much from their method of approaching the topic as from anything they could say about it...As it was likewise a rule with me never to allow myself to be irritated by what I heard (for it is too serious a subject to indulge frailties with), the best understanding existed between slaveholders and myself. We never quarreled, while, I believe, we had never failed to perceive the

extent of the difference of opinion and feeling between us. I met with much more cause for admiration in their frankness than reason to complain of illiberality. (1838: 226)

As we can see in the quote above, Martineau does not agree with the slaveholders' views. She does not believe in the institution of slavery. But rather than engage in squabbles over validity of opinions, Martineau puts scientific principals first. This is a relevant aspect of her methodology, as Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge point out,

The sociologist cannot make a link between the morals and manners s/he observe in a society and their realization of human happiness without some understanding of what those morals and manners mean to the people who practice them. The quality of mind most essential in the observer, for Martineau, then, is not *distance* but *sympathy*—a skill which distinguishes the student of society from 'the student of geology or general statistics'. (2001:85)

## SLAVERY

There are two issues that Martineau felt passionately about in *Society in America*: slavery and the rights of women. In terms of critiquing slavery, she was ahead of her time. She visited the United States in the 1830s, almost thirty years prior to the Civil War. The abolitionist movement was in its infancy compared to the momentum it later gained. Yet Martineau felt strongly that slavery was wrong and wrote extensively about it. As for women's issues: Martineau felt firsthand the discrimination based on gender. She saw education as a vehicle for equality.

If great thoughts constitute great minds, what can be expected from a woman whose whole intellect is employed on the trifling cares and comparatively mean occupations, to which the advocates for female ignorance would condemn her? (Martineau, quoted in Yates, 1985: 88)

For the mid 1800s, this was radical talk. Harriet Martineau also believed in hard work as a foundation for society. She says in *Society in America, Volume II*:

If the half-starved artisan, if the Negro slave, could, when lying down at length to rest, see and exhibit the full vision of their own lives, they would complain far less of too much work than of too little freedom, too little knowledge, too many wounds through their affections to their children, their brethren, their race. They would complain that their work had been of too exclusive a kind; too much in the actual, while it had been attempted to close the ideal from them. (Martineau 1837: 293)

That is an interesting way to frame the discussion. She is arguing that it isn't about the level of work, but about the intensity of thought. In other words, Martineau sees a connection between "head work" and "hand work." She feels that for a person to be truly happy, they have to have ample amounts of both. If the two types of work are disconnected, alienation results. Marx later wrote much about alienation, and the core concepts are similar. Without personally meaningful work and the benefit of their labor, people get disenchanting and disconnected from society.

This is a unique way to view the plight of the slaves. Martineau sees work as a benefit and an honor. For the slaves, it becomes

drudgery because they don't get to see the fruits of their labor. Free men get to work hard to achieve a goal and then enjoy the results; however, slaves don't have that opportunity. Thus freedom for Martineau is connected to labor: the contentment and financial benefits that flow from a job well done. Martineau speaks of hard work based on her own experience. She found it to be vitally important to exert herself.

Martineau also devotes time in *Society in America* to the morals of slavery. It would be easy to make slavery an unambiguous topic. Martineau recognizes that slavery is a complex institution.

It must be remembered that the greater number of slaveholders have no other idea than of holding slaves. Their fathers did it; they themselves have never known the colored race treated otherwise than as inferior beings, born to work for and to tease the whites, helpless, improvident, open to no higher inducements than indulgence and praise; capable of nothing but entire dependence. (Martineau 1837: 313)

She would never suggest that slavery is acceptable. Martineau is only pointing out that it is hard for Southerners to conceive of something completely outside their frame of reference. Moreover, Martineau makes it clear that treating slaves well does not justify their captivity.

I was heart-sick of being told of the ingratitude of slaves, and weary of explaining that indulgence can never atone for injury; that the extremest pampering, for a life time, is no equivalent for rights withheld, no reparation for irreparable injustice. What are the greatest possible amounts of finery, sweetmeats, dames, gratuities, and kind

words and looks, in exchange for political, social and domestic existence? for body and spirit? (Martineau 1837: 317)

Martineau is balancing two disparate ideas here: on one hand, many slave owners are unaccustomed to any other way of life and on the other, slavery is never justified. Another complex issue in regards to slavery is the sexual relations between biracial ("Quadroon") girls and their plantation masters. According to the text in *Society in America, Volume II*, many young men in the South take biracial girls as their girlfriends. This lasts until the men are married. The couple is then in a peculiar position, for the men must marry white women and the biracial girls have already established a relationship with the white men. This situation is a poor one all around. The foundation of our society is families. When that unit was threatened, the entire community suffered.

On the plantation, masters would often have sexual relations with his slaves. The children of these unions had the status of their mother, that is to say the children become slaves also. So the plantation owner gets to benefit financially from his lewd acts. In addition, because of the anger of the plantation wives, many of the biracial slave children were sold. This resulted in a tearing of the fabric of family life. This must have exacerbated feelings of hopelessness and despair.

As Martineau points out, plantation wives suffered under this system. Indeed there appears to be no winners in this sick situation. Women suffer because their husbands are engaging in adultery on a regular basis and yet the practice is culturally sanctioned, if implicitly. They suffer because they will have power over the slaves and are apt to take their anger over his indiscretions out on the slaves. Children suffered also:

What is to be expected of little girls

who boast of having got a Negro flogged for being impertinent to them, and who are surprised at the ‘ungentlemanly’ conduct of a master who maims his slave?...One of the absolutely inevitable results of slavery is a disregard of human rights; an inability even to comprehend them. (Martineau 1837: 342)

Under the slave system, children are taught to treat an entire race of people with complete contempt. They will teach their children such morals and perpetuate a broken and unhealthy cycle. Martineau had a clear interest in observing the morals of a population. Personal freedoms are also threatened in the slave system. Information is kept private, when knowing data would benefit the whole community. As Martineau points out,

The miserable quality of the Southern newspapers, and the omission from them of the subjects in which the people most require information, will go far to account for the people’s delusions on their own affairs, as compared with those of the rest of the world, and for their boasts of freedom, which probably arise from their knowing of none which is superior. (Martineau, 1837: 344)

Elsewhere in *Society in America*, Martineau expounds on the necessity of the free exchange of information. According to her, it is the freedom of the press that helps make America the democracy it is. By weakening the newspapers with a lack of true data, the South is trampling on liberties that were hard earned. Information is critical for action. If the information being presented is distorted or willfully wrong, people will be lulled into complacency. Martineau sees this as dangerous. The true knowledge of people would make them act

in different ways, and the slave system needed people to stay ignorant for the system to function optimally.

Martineau argues that some plantation owners claim that slaves prefer to be held in captivity. They point to the shelter and food that a slave receives as reward enough. As stated earlier, for Martineau there can be no reward great enough to enslave a people. And what of their mental states? Why do some slaves seem to prefer captivity? Martineau points out that,

Slaves are more or less degraded by slavery in proportion to their original strength of character or educational discipline of mind...The lowest order prefer release from duties and cares to the enjoyment of rights and the possession of themselves; and the highest order have a directly opposite taste. The mistake lies in not perceiving that slavery is emphatically condemned by the conduct of both. (Martineau 1838: 242)

So it doesn’t matter if a slave thinks they enjoy captivity, they haven’t experienced enough of life to know that they don’t ultimately. What matters is that putting another human being in bondage to satisfy financial needs is wrong and appalling. This argument shows Martineau’s interest in social justice for all.

There is one final issue regarding slavery that intersects with Martineau’s other passion: women’s rights. As she explains in *Society in America*, “governments in the United States have power to enslave certain women; and also to punish other women for inhuman treatment of such slaves. Neither of these powers are ‘just’, not being derived from the consent of the governed” (Martineau 1837:199). This is one of Martineau’s most famous arguments. Since slaves (and women) did not agree to the law, how do the laws apply to them? Some

people would refute this, saying that because some women enjoy privileges, they have agreed to follow the law. Martineau argues this is not true. She says that the two ideas are unrelated.

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Martineau was an early champion for the rights of women. According to Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge, Martineau's work is

an anticipation of concerns that will be central to feminist sociology: resistance to domination, moral agency, material equity and inclusivity. She focuses throughout her analysis on indicators that address this cluster of concerns; for example, she is consistently interested in the class system of a society, the relative freedom of opinion and expression, the status of women, the relation between metropolis and province, and the practice of charity. (2001: 92)

These are topics that are later treated in depth by Simmel, Marx and Durkheim. Yet Martineau contributed to this line of inquiry years before the above-mentioned theorists.

It is important to note that Martineau believed one reason that women should be educated is so they would be better wives and housekeepers:

For my part, I have no hesitation whatever in saying that the most ignorant women I have known have been the worst housekeepers; and that the most learned women I have known have been among the best,—wherever they have been early taught and trained to household business, as every woman

ought to be...If nobody doubts the difference in pleasantness of having to do with a silly and narrow-minded woman and with one who is intelligent and enlightened, it must be clear that the most intelligence and enlightenment is, the better. (Martineau 1848: 242)

This may sound odd, but Victorian England was a different time. Housework was a common ground for women. It was a good political move to focus on issues that could unite women. She wanted women to be true partners in their marriages.

Martineau had a broad view about the role of education in everyday life. As Valerie Pichanick points out, Martineau did not confine her interest "in female adult education to that of the educator or to those of the middle class. She also advocated the founding of a working women's college...and [also supported] the embryonic effort to admit women to such traditionally male bastions as the country's schools of medicine" (Pichanick 1977: 17).

By supporting educational vehicles, she felt that all women would ultimately benefit. Education was a way for women to gain access to male privilege and wages.

She thought that women should be paid commensurately to men at their jobs. Martineau spent a considerable amount of time applying her methodology to the study of women's occupational conditions. She was happy that women were gaining more opportunities but worried about their health and leisure time.

The working conditions of the 1800s in both the United States and Martineau's native England were dirty, loud and sometimes unsafe. Technology made more jobs available, but the cost was sometimes high. For instance, in the jewelry factories she visited in England, she wondered how the girls could withstand the heat and bright lights. There are many specifics such as this sprinkled throughout her stories. Her close

attention to detail and study of specific things to gain insight on people was later a strategy of Emile Durkheim's study of social facts.

Martineau advanced her beliefs through her writings. Newspapers were an outlet for Martineau to weigh in on popular politics and current events. How women were treated and viewed was important to Martineau. She felt that American women were not benefiting from being coddled. She felt if women could work hard and be educated, their lives would be much different.

While women's intellect is confined, her morals crushed, her health ruined, her weaknesses encouraged, and her strength punished; she is told that her lot is cast in the paradise of women; and there is no country in the world where there is so much boasting of the 'chivalrous' treatment she enjoys...Her case differs from that of the slave, as to the principle, just so far as this; that the indulgence is large and universal, instead of petty and capricious. (Martineau 1837: 106)

## CONCLUSION

As a feminist, Martineau believed in reform, not revolution. While her contemporary feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft wanted to change society, Martineau found strength in the status quo. Is one approach preferable? Perhaps not objectively. Wollstonecraft, for example, had much more passion in promoting change, perhaps because of the influence of the French Revolution and Rousseau. However, moderate changes such as those prescribed by Martineau may ultimately prove to be more tenable.

As mentioned before, *Society in America*

has not received the true critical reception it rightly deserves. Alexis De Tocqueville traveled to America during the same time period as Martineau did, and perhaps his fame overshadowed hers. His book, *Democracy in America* is much more widely cited and known. Despite his vibrant and lively prose, Martineau's book is methodologically superior. Why does her book get ignored while his is celebrated? Gender matters, but when we compare the two texts, the differences are profound.

Tocqueville barely spoke English and he only interviewed men of wealth and importance. He "prejudged situations and took ethnographic notes that reinforced his preconceived notions" (Hill 2001: 59). Tocqueville stayed in the United States for only nine months, with much time spent in Canada. Martineau spoke English and researched the United States prior to her trip. She interacted with a wider spectrum of people and took copious notes. As she was deaf, she had her research assistant listen to conversations and record her findings (Hill, 2001: 63). Martineau stayed in the United States for almost two years. One example of her attention to detail: when interviewing prisoners, she did so away from the guards, something Tocqueville did not bother to do.

All of this relates to Martineau's gender, because through her methodology, travel route, and choice of hosts, she reaffirms women in her writing. Martineau consulted women as a prime source of valuable information. She did not only focus on high status informants (government officials, politicians, and land owners for example) as Tocqueville did. As a woman, Martineau had special access to women and thus to that private sphere that Tocqueville never understood or cared to understand. There is strength in being able to navigate the public/private sphere. Martineau's ability to navigate the two worlds made her a better sociologist, I believe.

Ultimately, Martineau made a strong

contribution to the foundations of sociology. She faced many obstacles: gender, disability and personal hardships. Yet she was a sharp social observer who was able to channel that skill into a distinctive methodology. Her methodology was clear and easily applied to current social situations. She did a memorable job applying her method to the issue of slavery and women's rights as discussed in *Society in America*. Martineau's legacy is still emerging and she continues to be rediscovered by scholars.

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