

## THE AMERICAN STUDIES OF HARRIET MARTINEAU

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The greatest pleasure in rediscovering an early contributor to social research is in finding that her contribution has perennial rather than antiquarian relevance. David Riesman's use of Tocqueville's Democracy in America comes to mind as illustration.<sup>1</sup> I shall discuss three aspects of Harriet Martineau's work in this brief appreciation: her style as a field observer (particularly in America), her ethnology of American life and her role as the first English translator of August Comte's Positive Philosophy.

In the late 1820's Harriet Martineau sharpened her craftsmanship as a social commentator by writing articles on factory conditions. Her concern with social problems was characteristic of the times, but her first response to an image of herself as a professional came on winning a contest sponsored by an English Unitarian periodical in 1830. The contest offered prizes for the best essays written toward the conversion to Unitarianism of Catholics, Mohammedans, and Jews—ten guineas for the Catholic, fifteen for the Jewish, and twenty for the Mohammedan essay. Her first eightpenny stories concerned machine-breaking in the factories, labor "riots," and factory wages. In her autobiography, Harriet Martineau wrote:

It was in the autumn of 1827, I think, that a neighbor lent my sister Mrs. Marcet's "Conversations on Political Economy." I took up the book, chiefly to see what Political Economy precisely was; and great was my surprise to find that I had been teaching it unawares, in my stories about Machinery and Wages. It struck me at once that the principles of the whole science might be advantageously conveyed in the same way,—not by being smothered up in a story, but by being exhibited in their natural workings in selected passages of social life.<sup>2</sup>

The idea was not original. Liberal ministers attacked social problems in the twenties and thirties, popular lectures were given at mechanics institutes, and radical newspapers agitated on behalf of factory workers. A flood of books suitable for students began to appear, so that in 1827 Maria Edgeworth wrote:

It has now become high fashion with blue-stockings ladies to talk Political Economy, and make a great jab-

bering on the subject, while others with more sense, like Mrs. Marcet, hold their tongues and listen . . . . Meantime fine ladies require that their daughters' governesses should teach Political Economy. "Do you teach Political Economy?" "No, but I can learn it," "O dear, no; if you don't teach it, you won't do for me."<sup>3</sup>

In short, the prototype of the American college departmental "service courses" in social problems, social pathology, and social disorganization was abroad among English governesses nearly a century and a half ago. By 1832, Miss Martineau persuaded a publisher of the popular educational value of this idea. Two years later she completed her first major work, a nine volume series of thirty-four monographs and stories entitled Illustrations of Political Economy. Each volume illustrated a section of a comprehensive theory of political economy drawn from Adam Smith, Ricardo, Malthus and James Mill, by applying the concepts dramatically to a single economic or social problem or to a social experiment such as Brook Farm. Her method, incidentally, may have much to recommend it in some more pontifical quarters of modern theory building:

As for the method . . . when I began, I furnished myself with all the standard works on the subject of what I then took to be a science. I had made a skeleton plan of the course, comprehending the four divisions, Production, Distribution, Exchange and Consumption: and, in order to save my nerves from being overwhelmed with the thought of what I had undertaken, I resolved not to look beyond the department on which I was engaged . . . . It was about a morning's work to gather hints by this reading. The next process, occupying an evening . . . was making the Summary of Principles. . . . By this time, I perceived in what part of the world, and among what sort of people, the principles of my number appeared to operate the most manifestly. Such a scene I chose, be it where it might . . . . If the scene was foreign . . . I sent to the library for books of travel or topography: and the collecting and noting down hints from these finished the second day's work.<sup>4</sup>

Her selection of case problems prepared her for later efforts as a more systematic student of social life. The Illustrations included studies of child labor, wage disputes, strikes, agrarian societies, conditions in the spinning mills, the economics and morality of slavery and taxation.

Malthus she considered the greatest intellectual benefactor of her era, although she challenged sharply his policy recommendations, observing, "As for whether Mr. Malthus's doctrine . . . may not be attacking a difficulty

at the wrong end,—that is a fair matter of opinion. In my opinion, recent experience shows that it does attack a difficulty at the wrong end."<sup>5</sup> His ideas were of course illustrated in her series. One other undertaking in her earliest years disposed her toward social research. She wrote, for her own amusement, a biography of John Howard (1726–1790), the English philanthropist and prison reformer, whose Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe established him as the founder of modern penology.

Harriet Martineau's finest impulses toward research were drawn from sensitivity toward the work of others. In 1833, she read Mrs. Trollope's Domestic Manners in America. Finding it, as she reported later in her autobiography, prejudiced and excessively personal, she decided to see the New World for herself. She did not arrange in advance to do a book on America. Already lionized as a political and economic commentator, she was approached by publishers as soon as news of her intention to tour the United States became public. But she refused these offers, insisting she was going solely for relaxation and rest after the rigors of completing the Illustrations. Privately she was eager to investigate America. "I believed that it would be good for me to rough it for a time," she wrote, "before I grew too old and fixed in my habits for such an experiment."

From the letters of shipmates who travelled with Harriet Martineau to America in 1834, we learn that the ship's captain debated seriously over whether to put Miss Martineau ashore. Her outspoken abolitionism, he feared, would damage Anglo-American relations too severely. Those around her saw her as a crusader for abolition and women's suffrage. This was not her conception of herself. In her preface to her three volume study, Society in America, she wrote,

I determined to go to the United States, chiefly because I felt a strong curiosity to witness the actual working of republican institutions; and partly because the circumstance of the language being the same as my own is very important to one who, like myself, is too deaf to enjoy anything like an average opportunity of obtaining correct knowledge, where intercourse is carried on in a foreign language. I went with a mind, I believe, as nearly as possible unprejudiced about America, with a strong disposition to admire democratic institutions, but an entire ignorance how far the people of the United States lived up to, or fell below, their own theory. I had read whatever I could lay hold of that had been written about them; but was unable to satisfy myself that, after all, I understood anything whatever of their condition. As to knowledge of them, my mind was nearly a blank; as to opinion of their state, I did not carry the germ of one.<sup>6</sup>

The impressive elements in this comment are those that suggest the perspectives of the cultural anthropologist. It is as if a choice had been arrived at among more or less accessible cultures. The comment is helpful too in revealing her objectives and preconceptions about the subject. But Miss Martineau was more specific than this about her methods. She wrote,

For methods . . . one is, to compare the existing state of society in America with the principles on which it is professedly founded; thus testing Institutions, Morals, and Manners by an indisputable, instead of an arbitrary standard, and securing to myself the same point of view with my readers of both nations . . . . The other method . . . is to enable my readers to judge for themselves, better than I can for them, what my testimony is worth. For this purpose, I offer a brief account of my travels, with dates in full; and a report of the principal means I enjoyed of obtaining a knowledge of the country.<sup>7</sup>

The first tactic is the one employed by Gunnar Myrdal in The American Dilemma, a century later. After a detailed account of her sources of data, Harriet Martineau commented,

It has been frequently mentioned to me that my being a woman was one disadvantage; and my being previously heard of, another. In this I do not agree. I am sure, I have seen much more of domestic life than could possibly have been exhibited to any gentleman travelling through the country. The nursery, the boudoir, the kitchen, are all excellent schools in which to learn the morals and manners of a people.<sup>8</sup>

Of the effect of her most severe disability, deafness, she reflected the wisdom of the clinician:

I carry a trumpet of remarkable fidelity; an instrument, moreover, which seems to exert some winning power, by which I gain more in tete-a-tetes than is given to people who hear real conversation. Probably its charm consists in the new feeling which it imparts of ease and privacy in conversing with a deaf person . . . . I can hardly imagine fuller revelations to be made in household intercourse than my trumpet brought to me.<sup>9</sup>

The range and difficulty of her two year field trip through the states compares with that of a modern social scientist under contract with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to spend two years in Burma. She and her travelling companions spanned the nation from New York to Boston, and from Chicago to Atlanta, by schooner, riverboat, stagecoach, railroad and on foot. She covered about ten thousand miles in the two years

(excluding the Atlantic voyage) without accident. About four of her twenty-four months were spent in moving from place to place, another three in making the round trip from England.

Miss Martineau maintained meticulous records, making daily entries in her journals. She interviewed hundreds of individuals from James Madison to parlor maids in Boston and Philadelphia, to slaves at work in the cotton fields. She read a variety of American newspapers with sufficient care to devote a chapter to their style, content and influence on politics and public morals. Hungry for factual precision, she was seldom content to report for example that some portion of the economy or the transport system was expanding rapidly. Instead, she provided the auditor's summary of dollars expended. Of the peculiarities of American respondents in her interviews, she wrote,

For some weeks, I found it difficult to keep awake during the entire reply to any question I happened to ask. The person questioned seemed to feel himself put upon his conscience to give a full, true, and particular reply; and so he went back as near to the Deluge as the subject would admit, and forward to the millennium, taking care to omit nothing of consequence in the interval . . . . I presently found the information I obtained . . . so full, impartial, and accurate . . . that I became a great admirer of the American way of talking . . . . <sup>10</sup>

The quality and richness of her data are something for historians to judge. Perhaps the highest tribute paid to her study of American society is that no social historian of nineteenth century America has dared neglect her work as a primary source. Tocqueville's analysis of the American political structure is more profound, accurate and relevant than Harriet Martineau's, although the comparison is unfair if one considers the difference between their purposes. Yet the political analysis in Society in America exhibits a briskness and a range deserving of contemporary admiration.

Miss Martineau summarized concisely the political import of the new American class structure that was emerging along the eastern seaboard. Among the politically relevant features of the young economy she observed the lack of primogeniture, the vigorous technology and the emphatic value given material enterprises. She commented on the effects of rapid economic growth and social change and hinted at the rise of an intellectual elite and improved conditions for salaried professionals. She also foresaw an ultimate tendency toward "gradualist socialism."

She assessed accurately the effectiveness of federalism as an instrument for national growth, predicting that the southern states would find it politically and economically disastrous to attempt secession. She forecast a steady extension of the powers of the federal executive, and even commented

on the pattern of declining political influence across the standard term of presidential office. The early form of the Senate she interpreted as anomalous, concluding that reorganization was inevitable. On the problem of state's rights, Harriet Martineau commented that the critical question in any form of administrative organization is range of functions rather than scope. She viewed the existing federal structure as capable of operating smoothly "till there are fifty States around it, and longer." Of the party system, she wrote, "It is remarkable how nearly their positive statements of political doctrine agree, while they differ in almost every possible application of their common principles."<sup>11</sup>

The theory of democracy in Society in America is sketchy and unoriginal in contrast to Tocqueville,<sup>12</sup> yet Miss Martineau's vision of the problems inherent in American-style democracy was acute. Fatigued, even appalled sometimes, by the bombast of political oratory and debate, she nevertheless identified the problem of slowness in decision-making as well as the extent of civic apathy. Slowness in policy formation she considered nicely remedied by "eventual reactification, which ought to work eternally." And political apathy she regarded as tempered by the "imaginative political character of American," ever favored "by the intoxication of success."

The economic and social commentary in Society in America is in some respects richer, if less systematic, than that found in Democracy in America. With Tocqueville, she found that the American thirst for property was a prime mover in the structure of the new nation, but she gave this feature the emphasis it deserves while Tocqueville simply reports it in passing. The possession of land seemed to Harriet Martineau the American nostrum for all social problems and the value more universally shared than any other.

The general impact of her work on American life and letters is suggested in an anecdote related by Lady Philip Martineau. She reported that when she and Sir Philip visited President Theodore Roosevelt, he greeted them as descendants of "the famous Miss Martineau, with outstretched hands." Philip complained that Roosevelt proved much better acquainted with and more appreciative of Harriet than of his visitors.<sup>13</sup>

Harriet Martineau's style as a field observer is codified in her book, How to Observe, major portions of which she wrote during her ocean journey to America. Similar monographs on research techniques were to become fairly commonplace after 1894, when Charles Henderson of the University of Chicago published A Catechism for Social Observation. Miss Martineau's guide to observation is, I believe, the first systematic treatise of its kind. Her principles are, moreover, precursors of current efforts at the textbook level.

Her epistemology is conveyed in the "principles" she felt were requisite to effective observation: The observer must decide in advance what it is that he wants to know. He must devise a series of principles or hypotheses against

which to select and test his observations. These principles inevitably involve bias; therefore, the observer should develop a definite and systematic philosophy about the origin of "human feelings of right and wrong," to guard against intrusion of popular or vague notions.

Finally the observer must understand in advance that "prevalent virtues and vices are the result of gigantic general influences," that "in the workings of the social system, all the agents are known in the gross--all are determined. It is not their nature, but the proportions in which they are combined, which have to be ascertained."<sup>14</sup>

Most of her suggestions are less academic. A brief chapter on "Mechanical Requisites," for instance, urges "all who have strength and courage to go on foot." Among the great advantages of walking, she notes that of adequate sampling:

He is not bound to take up with such specimens as he may meet with by the side of the high road; he can penetrate into the recesses of the country, and drop into the hamlet among the hills, and the homesteads down the lanes . . . . He can obtain access to almost every class of persons, and learn their own views of their own affairs.<sup>15</sup>

She took her own advice seriously. In her account of her explorations throughout the Middle East nearly a decade later, she warned travelling woman of her day in her three volume study, Eastern Life, that they should travel without a maid because a maid would have to endure hardships "without compensatory intellectual enjoyment." Taking a dislike to her camel, she walked even in the heat of the desert.

Of greater interest is her grasp of institutional analysis. In How to Observe, Miss Martineau commented,

To arrive at the facts of the condition of a people through the discourse of individuals, is a hopeless enterprise. The plain truth is--it is beginning at the wrong end. The grand secret of wise inquiry . . . is to begin with the study of THINGS, using the DISCOURSE OF PERSONS as a commentary upon them . . . . The eloquence of Institutions and Records . . . is more comprehensive and more faithful than that of any variety of individual voices. The voice of a whole people goes up in the silent workings of an institution; the condition of the masses is reflected from the surface of a record.<sup>16</sup>

Her recommendations about what to observe reflect the more or less universal objects of current social scientific concern:

General indications must be looked for, instead of generalizations being framed from the manners of

individuals. In cities, do social meetings abound? and what are their purposes and character? . . . . What are the public amusements? . . . . In country towns, how is the imitation of the metropolis carried on? . . . . In the manners of all classes, from the highest to the lowest, are forms of manners enforced in action, or dismissed in words? Is there barbarous freedom in the lower, while there is formality in the higher ranks . . . . ? What . . . of the professional men of the society, from the eminent lawyer or physician of the metropolis down to the village barber? The manners of the great body of the professional men must indicate much of the requisitions of the society they serve . . . . A traveler who bears all this in mind can hardly go wrong. Everything that he looks upon will instruct him, from an aqueduct to a punch-bowl, from a penitentiary to an aviary, from the apparatus of a university to the furniture of an alehouse . . . .<sup>17</sup>

It is her choice of questions that excites admiration. Rudiments of the concern of contemporary students of the city, village culture, the life styles of social classes and the sociology of occupations are here foreshadowed.

Skilled as she was, Miss Martineau failed to achieve the social invisibility so useful for the participant observer. She prided herself on her outspoken manner; the limelight of publicity was seldom displeasing to her. According to her own account of her second year in America, she was showered with abuse in "almost every paper in the Union." Southern journals, she claimed, dared her to enter the slave states again and sent her mock invitations "to come and see how they would treat foreign incendiaries." The citizens of Cincinnati and Louisville, she alleged, planned to "hang her on the wharf."<sup>18</sup> She lost some friends in Washington for her too-open alliance with Whig policies. In Boston, while observing an Anti-Slavery Society meeting, she was asked to speak on behalf of abolition. To do so meant to destroy her effort in the southern states to depict herself as a neutral observer; to refuse meant to back down on her well known abolitionist broadsides published earlier in England.<sup>19</sup> True to character, she spoke out.

Society in America has the freshness and unevenness of a field report. Dissatisfied with her achievement, Harriet Martineau wrote an improved three volume study, Retrospect of Western Travel, three years later. The two studies taken together reveal the range of her American inquiries. They include reports of firsthand observations of mental hospitals, prisons, institutions for the deaf, a Quaker wedding and a Shaker dance ritual, West Point, Niagara Falls, the Senate Chamber, the plantation and the slave auction.



Among a hundred sought-after impressions and meticulous observations, only one caused Harriet's brief undoing: a Cincinnati slaughterhouse.

Harriet Martineau wrote some twenty books between 1838 and 1851, several of them of lasting interest, including How to Observe, Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development, and Eastern Life. In 1850,

After hearing Comte's name for many years, and having a vague notion of the relation of his philosophy to the intellectual and social needs of the time, I obtained something like a clear preparatory view, at second-hand, from a friend at whose house in Yorkshire I was staying . . . . What I learned then and there impelled me to study the great book for myself. <sup>20</sup>

She completed translation of Positive Philosophy<sup>21</sup> in one year. "I know no greater luxury," she reported later, "after months of writing, than reading, and making an analysis as one goes." She enjoyed her work on Comte's book immensely:

I find in my diary some very strong expressions of rapture about my task . . . . I should never enjoy anything so much again . . . . If I were now to live and work for twenty years, I could never enjoy anything more. The vast range of knowledge . . . is a prodigious treat; and yet more, the clear enunciation, and incessant application of principles. The weak part of the book, --the sacrifices made to system and order, happens just to fall in with my weak tendency in that direction. <sup>22</sup>

The translation sold extremely well and was issued simultaneously in America and England. Comte wrote to her that her work made his book known to "a degree that he could never in his lifetime have hoped."<sup>23</sup> Later, he urged use of her version over his own in popularizing the book in France.

Harriet Martineau wrote her own last words on her limitations. In her obituary, which she prepared well in advance of her death for eventual publication in the London Daily News, she wrote,

Condensation of Comte's Positive Philosophy . . .  
 . . . was her last considerable work; and there is no other, perhaps, which so well manifests the real character of her ability . . . . Her original power was nothing more than was due to earnestness and intellectual clearness within a certain range . . . . She could popularize, while she could neither discover nor invent . . . . She saw the human race, as she believed, advancing under the law of progress; she enjoyed her share of the experience. . . . <sup>24</sup>

## Footnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, David Riesman, "Tocqueville and Associations: An Introduction," Autonomous Groups, XII, 2 (Winter, 1956), 1-3.
- <sup>2</sup> Harriet Martineau's Autobiography, edited by Maria W. Chapman (Boston, 1877), I, 105.
- <sup>3</sup> A.J.C. Hare, editor, Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth (London, 1894), II, 65.
- <sup>4</sup> Autobiography, 147-8.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 159.
- <sup>6</sup> Harriet Martineau, Society in America (London: Sonders and Otlly, 1837), ix-x.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., vii-ix.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., xvi.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., xvii-xviii.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., III, 77.
- <sup>11</sup> Society in America, I, 11- 12.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Marvin Myers, "The Basic Democrat: A Version of Tocqueville," Political Science Quarterly, LXXII, 1 (March, 1957), 50-70.
- <sup>13</sup> Vera Wheatley, The Life and Works of Harriet Martineau (London, 1957), 149.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 12 and 40.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 57.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 63-4.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 55-6.
- <sup>18</sup> Autobiography, I, 362-4. See also Bertha-Monica Sterns, "Miss Sedgwick Observes Harriet Martineau," The New England Quarterly, VII, 3 (September, 1934), 533-541.
- <sup>19</sup> See Stephen Bloore, "Miss Martineau Speaks Out," The New England Quarterly, IX, 3 (September, 1936), 403-416.
- <sup>20</sup> Autobiography, II, 57.
- <sup>21</sup> The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, tr. (London: John Chapman, 1853, and Boston: D. Appleton, 1853), 2 Vols.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., II, 71.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., II, 422.
- <sup>24</sup> Autobiography, II, 572, "Memorials" section.