

HARRIET MARTINEAU &  
THE BIRTH OF SOCIOLOGY

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. Although it has been obvious for years, it is only with recently raised sensitivity that sociologists have noted the absence of women in the written history of the discipline. This historiographic neglect only continues the inattention to female thinkers throughout time. It is true that during the formative years of sociology, women rarely wrote the kinds of theoretical treatises which helped establish the social sciences. The reason is simple. Women were seldom admitted to social positions with time, resources, and incentives to produce such works.

. There is at least one instance in which a woman played a major catalytic role in establishing the discipline of sociology. Its origin as a distinctive approach to knowledge is most commonly traced to Auguste Comte's Positive Philosophy. While the tradition he began undoubtedly would have survived in France, Comte's sociology would have been far less central outside of France without an early and popular English translation. French was a common second language among lay intelligentsia, as well as among scholars, but the bulk and complexity of Comte's original Cours de Philosophie Positive discouraged all but the most persistent lay readers. Then how did this massive work ever become the cornerstone of sociology in the English speaking world, as well as in France? This was accomplished, not by a man of academic learning, but by an unusual Englishwoman named Harriet Martineau.

THE TRANSLATION

. The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, as it was titled, first appeared in 1853. The French version had been in circulation for several years, in a form which

could only discourage the non-native French scholar. It consisted of six volumes of collected lectures which were inevitably repetitious. One must remember that Comte was attempting to compile all existing positive knowledge. The hierarchy of the sciences and the three stages of mind constitute only the introduction to this opus. "Truths" of such sciences as mathematics, physics, biology, and of course, sociology, comprise the bulk of the work. In this form, the science of society which Comte proposed could only slowly have percolated to his immediate associates and countrymen.

. Martineau's accomplishment was remarkable. She commenced her translation in 1851, and finished it within two years. It was more than a translation. As a careful reader of footnotes may recall, the English edition is listed as "freely translated and condensed." Martineau literally rewrote the book with the full approval of its author, and with very little assistance. When done, she had two volumes in place of the original six. One of her biographers wrote: "So well was her work accomplished that Comte himself adopted it for his students' use, removing from his list of books for Positivists his own edition of his course and instead, recommending the English translation by Miss Martineau." (Miller 1890 218) When a patron sent her 500 pounds

Sterling for her work, she applied it to printing costs. She further insisted on sharing the ultimate proceeds with Comte. "I believe that if I were now to live and work for twenty years, I could never enjoy anything more," she said (1877 II 71).

. In creating this translation, Martineau acted as a catalyst in the birth of sociology. Pragmatically, her loose and liberal interpretation created a superior product to more scholarly and literal translations. However few are the Twentieth Century sociologists who have read the Positive Philosophy

still fewer would have ingested a version three times as long. The influence which Comte had on Nineteenth Century Anglophones is attributable largely to Harriet Martineau's mediation.

#### THE TRANSLATOR

. Who was this woman? Was she a Positivist? Space does not permit a full exposition of Martineau's writings, but a brief sketch of her life will help place the Comte translation in context. She was a few years older than Spencer, having been born in 1802, and died in 1876. The product of a Unitarian home and an uneven formal education, Martineau achieved fame before she was 35 in a series of monthly tales illustrating the principles of political economy (1834). Although their gross oversimplification aggravated sophisticated economists like John Stuart Mill, the tales caught the popular imagination. Breaking away from her provincial home of Norwich, Martineau was lionized by London society. Travels to America, India and the Middle East resulted in popular travelogs and commentaries. She wrote many books, pamphlets, and newspaper leaders.

. Her Society in America (1837) is of special significance. In this book she evaluated American institutions from the "objective" standpoint of basic constitutional principles. Slavery, the debasement of women, and the United States Senate she found to be inconsistent and in need of expunging. Scattered here and there were kernels of sociological insight. With the exception of her feminist views, far ahead of her time, Martineau's proto-sociology has been ignored by posterity (Rossi 1973). Yet she often expressed opinions in accord with the core ideas of modern sociology.

. As suggested by her first major work, Martineau anticipated the development of nomothetic social analysis. In form, she could agree with Comte. Superstition must pass before the power of Positive

Science. Right principles will show the way to the proper organization of society. The contents of Comte's corporatism was scarcely in keeping with her beloved principles of political economy. Perhaps she assumed the sociologist priests of the new society would know enough not to interfere with free market mechanisms. Moreover, Comte cannot be called a feminist. From her first published piece in an obscure religious journal, Martineau was an advocate for the rights of women, and a critic of those institutions which demeaned her sex. For all her admiration, Martineau was not a true follower of Comte. Her ideas are more compatible with those of Spencer.

. Martineau never met Comte or Spencer. Indeed, she met relatively few of the leading intellectuals of her time, and was instead limited to the company of the faded salon society of bored bourgeois ladies and gentlemen of shallow mind. Despite her extraordinary life, Martineau remained a prisoner of her sex. She nevertheless made a unique contribution to the discipline of sociology by producing a relatively readable English version of the Positive Philosophy which was to endure as a standard for decades to come. Her original work may now be ignored by the discipline, yet it behooves us to acknowledge the impact of Harriet Martineau.

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