

# Harriet Martineau

A Brief Biography and Intellectual History

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Harriet Martineau, one of the earliest Western sociologists, was born in 1802 in Norwich, England. Martineau was a self-taught expert in political economic theory, and wrote prolifically about the relations between politics, economics, morals, and social life throughout her career. Her intellectual work was centered by a staunchly moral perspective that stemmed from her Unitarian faith. She was fiercely critical of the inequality and injustice faced by girls and women, slaves, wage slaves, and the working poor.

Martineau was one of the first women journalists, and also worked as a translator, speech writer, and wrote acclaimed novels that invited readers to consider pressing social issues of the day. Many of her ideas about political economy and society were presented in the form of stories, making them appealing and accessible. She was known at the time for her keen ability to explain complicated ideas in an easy-to-understand manner, and should be considered one of the first public sociologists.

Martineau's key contribution to the field of sociology was her assertion that when studying society, one must focus on all aspects of it. She emphasized the importance of examining political, religious, and social institutions. Martineau believed that by studying society in this way, one could deduce why inequality existed, particularly that faced by girls and women. In her writing she brought an early feminist perspective to bear on issues such as marriage, children, home and religious life, and race relations.

Her social theoretical perspective was often focused on the moral stance of a populace and how it did or did not correspond to the social, economic, and political relations of its society. Martineau measured progress in society by three standards: the status of those who hold the least power in society, popular views of authority and autonomy, and access to resources that allow the realization of autonomy and moral action.

She won numerous awards for her writing, and was a rare successful and popular--though controversial--working woman writer during the Victorian era. She published over 50 books and over 2,000 articles in her lifetime. Her translation into English and rearticulation of Auguste Comte's foundational sociological text, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, was received so well by readers and by Comte himself that he had Martineau's English version translated back to French.

She died in 1876 near Ambleside, Westmorland, in England. Martineau's sweeping contributions to social thought are more often than not overlooked within the cannon of classical sociological theory, though her work was widely lauded in its day, and preceded that of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber.

## **Family and Early Life**

Martineau was the sixth of eight children born to Elizabeth Rankin and Thomas Martineau. Thomas owned a textile mill, and Elizabeth was the daughter of a sugar refiner and grocer, making the family economically stable and wealthier than most Britons at the time. The Martineau family were descendants of French Huguenots who fled Catholic France for Protestant England. The family practiced Unitarian faith, and instilled the importance of education and critical thinking in all of their children. However, Elizabeth was also a strict believer in traditional gender roles, so while the Martineau boys went to college, the girls did not, and were expected to learn domestic work instead. This would prove to be a formative life experience for Harriet, who bucked all traditional gender expectations, and wrote extensively about gender inequality.

## **Intellectual Development and Work**

Martineau was a voracious reader from a young age, was well read in Thomas Malthus by the time she was 15, and had already become a political-economist at that age, by her own recollection. She wrote and published her first written work, "On Female Education," in 1821 as an anonymous author. This piece was a critique of her own educational experience, and how it was formally stopped when she reached adulthood.

When her father's business failed in 1829 she decided to earn a living for her family, and became a working writer. She wrote for the *Monthly Repository*, a Unitarian publication, and published her first commissioned volume, *Illustrations of Political Economy*, funded by Charles Fox, in 1832. These illustrations were a monthly series that ran for two years, in which Martineau critiqued politics and economic practices of the day by presenting illustrated tellings of the ideas of Malthus, Jon Stuart Mill, David Ricardo, and Adam Smith. The series was designed as a tutorial for the general reading audience. She won prizes for some of her essays, and the series sold more copies than did the work of Dickens at the time. Among her critiques, Martineau argued that tariffs in early American society only benefited the rich and hurt the working classes both in the US and in Britain. She also advocated for the Whig Poor Law reforms, which shifted assistance to the British poor from cash donations to the workhouse model.

In her early years as a writer she advocated for free market economic principles in keeping with the philosophy of Adam Smith, however later in her career, she advocated for government action to stem inequality and injustice, and is remembered by some as a social reformer due to her belief in the progressive evolution of society.

Martineau broke with Unitarianism in 1831 for freethinking, a philosophical position that seeks truth based on reason, logic, and empiricism, rather than believing in truths dictated by authority figures, tradition, or religious dogma. This shift resonates with her reverence for August Comte's positivistic sociology, and her belief in progress.

In 1832 Martineau moved to London, where she circulated among leading British intellectuals and writers, including Malthus, Mill, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Thomas Carlyle. From there she continued to write her political economy series until 1834.

When the series was completed, Martineau traveled to the US to study the young nation's political economy and moral structure, much as Alexis de Tocqueville did. While there, she became acquainted with Transcendentalists and abolitionists, and with those involved in

education for girls and woman. She later published *Society in America*, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, and *How to Observe Morals and Manners*--considered her first sociological research publication--which expressed her support for abolition of slavery, criticism of the immorality and economic inefficiency of slavery, its impact on the working classes in the US and in Britain, and fiercely criticized the state of education for women. Martineau became politically active for the US abolitionist cause, and sold embroidery in order to donate the proceeds to it. Following her trip she also worked as the English correspondent for the *American Anti-Slavery Standard* through the end of the American Civil War.

Between 1839 and 1845 Martineau was ill with a uterine tumor and housebound. She moved out of London to a more peaceful location for the duration of her illness. She continued to write extensively during this time, but her experience of illness and with doctors prompted her to write about those topics. She published *Life in the Sickroom*, which challenged the doctor-patient relationship of total domination and submission, and was viciously criticized by the medical establishment for doing so.

After returning to health she traveled through Egypt, Palestine and Syria in 1846. Martineau focused her analytic lens on religious ideas and customs during this trip, and observed that religious doctrine was increasingly vague as it evolved. This led her to conclude, in her written work based on this trip, *Eastern Life, Present and Past*, that humanity was evolving toward atheism, which she framed as rational, positivist progress. The atheistic nature of her later writing, as well as her advocacy for mesmerism, which she believed cured her tumor and the other ailments she had suffered, caused deep divisions between her and some of her friends.

In her later years Martineau contributed to the *Daily News* and the radical leftist *Westminster Review*. She remained politically active, advocating for women's rights during the 1850s and '60s. She supported the Married Women's Property Bill, the licensing of prostitution and legal regulation of customers, and women's suffrage. Her autobiography was published posthumously in 1877.

Founded in 1994 by Unitarians in Norwich and with support from Manchester College, Oxford, The Martineau Society in England holds an annual conference in her honor. Much of her written work is in the public domain and available for free at the Online Library of Liberty, and many of her letters are available to the public via the British National Archives.

### **Selected Bibliography**

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