

**HARRIET MARTINEAU**  
**Morals and Manners**  
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Harriet Martineau died in 1876. Her ideas and major influence in sociology died shortly thereafter. Recently there has been a concerted effort to reintroduce her ideas to a new generation of sociologists. Although there has been some reference made to her throughout the twentieth century, particularly to her literary work, it has not been until the last few years that her place in sociology has been reclaimed. Along with locating her ideas and alongside Durkheim, Weber, and other classical sociologists, it is also necessary to reconstruct her graven image. A more complete understanding and connection with ideas are helped along when there is a connection with the person. The first point of order is to briefly discuss Martineau's place in sociology.

**Harriet Martineau**

Harriet Martineau lived and worked simultaneously with sociological icons such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Karl Marx, yet only recently has her work been recovered from the intellectual dustbin in sociology. Her ideas crystallized between 1834 and 1869, starting with a love for political economy then venturing on a regular basis into the writing of novels. Virtually all of her work was oriented to the general reading public, at least the more generally educated audience. The discipline of sociology was in its early infancy and she was, after all, a pioneer woman in a world women were rarely allowed visitation. Although she was a prolific writer, her contributions to sociology center around three major works, an analysis of

pre-civil war America (1837), a methodological treatise (1838), and her translation and condensing of Auguste Comte's *Philosophy Positive* (1853). The treatise, "Society in America," was the result of a two-year visit to the United States intended as a much needed vacation. She was convinced on her return to write about her travels and observations by a long time associate and publisher. Her observations and conversations produced an extremely insightful analysis of the dilemmas of American slave society and as Hill (1989) maintains were ever more insightful and poignant than the widely read Alex de Tocqueville's *Democracy In America* (1959). Following her somewhat unintended study of American Society, she set about the task of producing a book hypothetically written for the traveler who needs to be keenly aware of the framework in which he or she views and then comments on other cultures, but in reality lays out the foundation of a sociological methodology. A brief discussion of this work will be addressed further on in the paper. Her growing interest in positive philosophy led her from her Unitarian roots to discovering and becoming completely enthralled with, the work of Auguste Comte. One might argue that her non-conformist Unitarian roots were a perfect springboard for positive philosophy. Her correspondence with Comte and her defense of his work illustrates the conviction and dedication she had to his ideas. She set out to translate this massive work into English and in the process condense the book making it more intelligible as well as accessible to the English-speaking public. Her conviction to the ideas are made clear when, in the later reprint of the book the editor wanted the work condensed even more to save printing costs and generally reduce the overall size, and she refused, afraid it would corrupt the ideas too much. She had after all, already reduced it to its bare minimum. Comte's original piece was 4000 pages long and Harriet reduced it to 2000 pages. Unfortunately, none of her works considered

sociological treatises were widely read by audiences of social scientists and thus virtually disappeared in the twentieth century. Sociologists pay little attention to Comte except to acknowledge that he did provide us with our name and identity, but who reads Comte anymore? It appears that Comte himself stopped reading Comte and read Martineau's translation instead. Her work on American society is worthwhile for those interested in how one does sociology, but the piece itself would have only limited appeal at best. It is her work on methodology that might in the end provide her with a permanent place in the classics of sociology along side *The Rules of Sociological Methods* by Emile Durkheim (1964 [original 1895]). As Seymour Martin Lipset points out (1968:2):

This volume (How to Observe Manners and Morals) is, perhaps, the first book on the methodology of social research in the then still unborn disciplines of sociology and anthropology. Martineau realized that the study of social systems was a separate scientific discipline, and called it the "science of morals and manners."

Consequently her work has had negligible influence on late 20<sup>th</sup> century sociology, and certainly to this point in time it is safe to say she has had no enduring impact.

Not until over one hundred years after her death, as sociology entered the new millennium, did sociologists look to re-establish some long lost roots and more importantly discover women's contributions to the great tradition of sociology. Symbolic Interaction theory, with its focus on observational research, will see a direct benefit from studying Martineau. Feminist studies should benefit as will from not only the outline of how to do research but in the implicit assumption that at the base of human research rests the driving principle of bettering the human race. For Martineau, as we will see, it is the drive towards human happiness which shapes morals and manners whereas for Feminist Studies it is the drive towards human equality,

which in the end may amount to the same thing. Locating Harriet Martineau's mortal remains helps provide a physical imagery that seems essential in creating an enduring mental conception of not only the person but her contributions as well. In the end, finding her grave plays one small part of paying homage to unarguably the first great woman sociologist.

### **Method**

“He will find no better place of study than the Cemetery,– no more instructive teaching than Monumental Inscriptions. The brief language of the dead will teach him more than the longest discourses of the living.” (Martineau, 1995:113)

Harriet Martineau was one of the first sociologists to elaborate both a method and a methodology for the study of social life. Despite Gillian Thomas' somewhat dismissive tone concerning Martineau's enthusiasm for completing the book on morals and manners (1985:33), her work elaborates one of the first systematic approaches for doing observational research. Her somewhat pensive approach to the original work, an article in a larger series, comes mostly from having agreed to work on what otherwise would have been a primarily restful trip. “My felicity would have been complete if I could have looked forward to a month of absolute idleness: but my constitutional weakness, –my difficulty in saying “No,” was in my way, and a good deal spoiled my holiday” (Martineau 1877, Vol. 1:332). When the original edited book was not published she was convinced to take her article and write her own book. Here one gets the sense that it was a difficult but worthwhile project (Martineau 1877:416):

“The chapter which I mentioned having written at sea, on “How to observe Morals and Manners, was, by the desire of the proposer and of Mr. Knight, to be expanded into a volume; and this piece of tough work, which required a good deal of reading and thinking, I accomplished this spring.”

In, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, (1989 [1838]) she suggests that a traveler (the researcher) must have both Philosophical and Moral Requisites when observing cultures. She suggests that research must be conducted by those trained in the art of objective observation. The observer must be open minded but at the same time hold an ideal type in which to compare and appropriately generalize about what is being observed, but not to necessarily judge the behavior or practices, although that is not completely ruled out as indicated by her stance on slavery. Her approach suggests that research must be guided by appropriate ends. Those ends appear to be established by God or at least something that appears as virtually innate in humankind. The desired end is human happiness, similar to the driving principles in Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, or Jeremy Bentham. This “greatest happiness for the greatest group” measuring rod tells us that to some extent research, for Martineau, is not value neutral and in fact does lend itself to advocacy research found in contemporary observational approaches, particularly feminist studies. This notion of an underlying principle to knowledge is not unique in sociology; Critical Theory suggests a similar concern with the connection made between knowledge and human interest. Thus, for example, emancipatory research is connected to emancipatory interests. For Martineau, the advancement of moral society in all its positive trappings is linked to that one universal drive towards human happiness. Martineau further suggests that the Mechanical Requisites perhaps need to be stood on their head and viewed in reverse order from what might on the surface seem the correct way to acquire knowledge. (In the same way Marx stood Hegel on his head.) That is, rather than relying on what people say about morals (norms, values etc.) one needs first to observe the ‘things’ objectively then look to verbal expressions of those things. C.W. Mills was to argue much later, in a slightly different

context, that expressed statements actually reflect more structural vocabularies of motives. Those vocabularies engulf certain situations often conditioned by such accepted structural constraints such as economic or religious institutional frameworks (Mills, 1940). Martineau does state that the observer must be careful to converse with people from all walks of life and poke and probe into all the nooks and crannies of human interaction, representing both public and private spheres of life. Even though the inquirer might be careful to do all that, the process cannot guarantee the observer will come away knowing the morals and manners of a group; although this would bring us far closer than limiting sources to one particular social class, race, or gender. The more accurate reflection of the morals of a people will reside in collective representations, the sub-text, rather than in words and will be immortalized in such artifacts as the cemetery stone.

Given her keen insight into the importance of studying cemeteries and grave markers, it is a shame her gravestone is lost. Her gravesite by all indications still resides in Key Hill Cemetery and can be roughly located with reasonable certainty within the graveyard. The shame of having lost the grave marker is two fold. First, one of the founding women sociologists, highly respected in her time, lacks a proper memorial. Perhaps this reflects her position in sociology over the years since her death. However, resurgence of interest in her work is bringing her back into the fold of classical sociology. Perhaps we must settle for the Reformers Memorial found at Kensal Green cemetery in London that includes her name among a long list of names considered to have made lasting contributions to the improvement of British society. (See Figure 9) As stated on the marker:

“Erected to the memory of men and women who have generously given their time and means to improve the conditions and enlarge the happiness of all classes of society. They

have felt that a far happier and more prosperous life is within the reach of all men, and they have earnestly sought to realize it. The old brutal laws of imprisonment from free printing have been swept away and the right of selecting our own lawmakers has been gained mainly by their efforts. The exercise of these rights will give the people an interest in the laws that govern them, and will make them better men and better citizens.”

Secondly, the loss of grave markers generally prohibits our ability to document the stated morals of a community. In the case of Harriet, we know she left us precious little in way of an epitaph, which in itself tells us she likely did not subscribe to many of the dominate vocabularies of motives of the time or wished not to contribute to defining the morals of the time. Nonetheless, it would have been useful to see etched in stone the unobtrusiveness of such a grand early sociologist. She had always played down her importance and contributions and the lack of an epitaph is one more indication of her humility.







Figure 7 Marker number 788 I



Figure 8: Left of this marker two plots should be the location of Harriet Martineau's Grave.



Figure 9 Reformers marker in Kensal Green Cemetery London, England.



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