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# Martineauian Sociology and Our Disciplinary Future

*Michael R. Hill*

**I** ARGUE ABOVE, IN CONCERT WITH MY COLLEAGUES, THAT WE MUST TAKE Harriet Martineau seriously, and that there are sound reasons for so doing. The history, sophistication, innovativeness, and continuing resonance of her work and ideas are dramatic, engaging, and impressive by all of the yardsticks used to assess the merit and importance of our sociological founders. We are asked, on occasion, “Yes, but what possible difference does Martineau make to sociology today?” Sheer impudence aside, it is a question to answer carefully, with probity, and our answers must be convincing rather than contrived. The gravity of the question comes home to us if we rephrase the query, to ask: “What possible difference does it make for sociology today if we had never heard of Durkheim, Weber, Marx, or Mead?” Presumably, many of us would reply that the absence of such major figures would make an enormous impact, that the shape and scope of sociology as a disciplinary enterprise would be quite else than it is without their contributions. Thus so with Martineau. Any sociologies (especially the received sociology of the standard textbooks) that lack the conscious acknowledgment, influence, and impetus of her work are necessarily strange and distorted versions of sociology. Likewise, the absence of Durkheim, Weber, Marx, or Mead would also create curiously strange and unrecognizable sociologies. Our discipline grows stronger from inclusion and dialogue, not from exclusion and silence.

When we take Martineau seriously, as intellectuals and scholars, we restore a bit of the balance to our discipline lost through decades of overloading our textbooks, theory courses, journals and monographs with “content” selected too often by institutionally-entrenched, virulently patriarchal gatekeepers. But the proverbial cat is now out of the bag. Martineau

has been re-discovered, and the consequences of that event are evidenced in partial measure by the papers contributed to this book. We are now in position, collectively, to outline a serious reply to those who ask if knowing about Martineau “makes any difference.” It is now possible to draw the contours of a Martineauian sociology. Doubtless future Martineau scholars may delineate these configurations in different ways—theoretical propositions, after all, are necessarily “working hypotheses” (Mead 1899) intended for subsequent modification and adjustment.

The practice and promulgation of Martineauian sociology holds considerable promise for the twenty-first century. It provides a personal, professional, and pedagogical alternative to the pervasive but bankrupt abstracted empiricism so prevalent during the last fifty years. The following core traits are representative of the values and sociological possibilities that Martineau personified and valued:

- Insistence on logically ordered and carefully reasoned expositions of social processes and situations.
- Fundamental quest for systemic understanding of social institutions as wholes, including their complexity and historical development, and the interconnections between institutionalized social structures.
- Respect for the direct empirical observation and in-depth qualitative investigation of social patterns, in contrast to today’s near universal reliance on survey questionnaire data.
- Use of discourse as corroboration, never as primary empirical evidence.
- Appreciation for applied demographic, economic, environmental and epidemiological research, including careful, systematic reviews and analyses of government reports and census materials.
- Requirement for integrity, egalitarianism, and high moral standards in personal and professional conduct.
- Embrace rather than eschew sociological research into social questions in which one has deep personal interest and motivation.
- Sensitivity to ethnocentrism and its consequences.
- Recognition of the importance of conducting inclusive investigations across divisive social attributes, including gender, class, race, physical disability, and the like, together with active concern for oppressed peoples.
- Concern to understand everyday life and routine experiences.
- Sensitivity to the impact of metatheoretical assumptions on inferences and research design.

- Recognition of sociology as a socially purposeful activity, as encompassing far more than strictly academic, ivory tower enterprises.
- Dedication to a strong personal work ethic.
- Responsiveness to local as well as national social and political issues, together with a conception of sociology as a public service.
- Dissemination of sociological insights and findings to the lay public in comprehensible formats, including essays, editorials, didactic fiction, and newspaper columns.
- Sociological reflexivity, together with individual reflection on the self and its circumstances, capabilities, constraints, and opportunities.
- An abiding faith in the possibilities for human social improvement.
- Ever increasing capacity for personal growth and intellectual insight.
- Independence of thought, together with steadfast public commitment and private sacrifice when conscience dictates—and thereby necessitates—support for unpopular ideas and perspectives.

In our present era, where self-serving interpersonal impression management and raw professional aggrandizement are too often the norm at national sociological meetings and elsewhere within the discipline, Martineauian sociology provides a refreshing call for responsible disciplinary assessment, reflection, and action. In better understanding the early work of Harriet Martineau, we open the discipline of sociology to rational reform, greater applied relevance, and future renewal.