Harriet Martineau was born to a middle-class manufacturer in Norwich, England. Her childhood might be best described as sickly, resulting in near complete deafness by age 12. Martineau's Unitarian parents emphasized education and social awareness for all of their children. While Martineau's schooling was not of the same caliber of her brothers, she received informal instruction in writing, math, French, and Latin and 2 years of formal master's education in French and Latin. Not all of Martineau's father's business practices were consistent with the emerging capitalist economy. He adhered to profit sharing for his employees, even as England entered an economic crisis in the 1820s. As the family's wealth declined, Martineau became fascinated with political economy. Most middle-class Victorian women saw marriage as the antidote for economic uncertainty. Martineau, however, became a professional writer.

Martineau was an established author when she began her 25-volume work, *Illustrations in Political Economy* (1832–1834). Using fiction, Martineau identified the new science of political economy. Within 2 years, *Illustrations* was outselling the works of her contemporary Charles Dickens.

With her travels to America, Martineau ventured into what would become sociological writing. *Society in America* (1837) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838) were not the typical travel writings of the period; they used the social theories and methods that Martineau set forth in *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838). Martineau theorized that a true understanding of a society must include an examination of both cultural beliefs (morals) and social interaction (manners). For Martineau, the distinction between natural sciences and a science of society was sympathy for the social actor, a methodology predictive of Weber’s *verstehen*. *Morals and Manners* was prescient of sociology. Earlier than Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, Martineau investigated social class, religion, suicide, national character, the status of women, and the interrelationship between self and society.

*Society in America* (1837) tackled the ethnocentrism in 19th-century comparative texts. Martineau emphasized the domestic role of women as a critical element to the scientific comparison between British and American societies. Martineau documented the claimed values of Americans and then compared those morals to the everyday life she observed. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, Martineau identified the disparities between the American social structure and its democratic values. While Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835) set forth the connection between American values and conformity, Martineau identified the relationship between values and structural change. She observed America’s transition from feudal morals (represented by slavery) to democratic values (represented by the abolitionist movement).

Martineau’s intrigue with societies in transition led her to the Middle East. In *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848), Martineau concluded that human history was moving in the direction of new forms of religion. She longed for, as Durkheim would do 40 years later, a scientific study of society that would serve as an intellectual replacement for traditional religion.

By the 1850s, English interest in Comtean thought was growing. However, Auguste Comte’s (1838)
Cours de Philosophie Positive tended toward incoherency and repetition in its original French. By translating and condensing Comte’s six-volume treatise, Martineau wanted to introduce the English-speaking world to a science that allowed for social reform. Comte was pleased with the translation and believed that it took Martineau to clarify his ideas.

In traditional sociology texts, Comte is recognized as the “Father of Sociology” and Martineau as his translator. However, she was more than that. In their time, Martineau’s short novels of political economy outsold the works of Dickens; her comparative historical account of 19th-century American society was likened to Tocqueville’s; 60 years before Durkheim wrote The Rules of the Sociological Method (1895), Martineau authored How to Observe Morals and Manners (1838); and through her translation of Comte’s Course de Philosophie Positive, Martineau congealed his ideas and introduced sociology to the English-speaking world. It would be accurate to name Martineau the “Mother of Sociology.”

See also
Domestic Labor; Education: Gender Differences; Suicide

Further Readings

Cynthia Siemsen

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Harvard

MLA

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/martineau_harriet_1802_1876