
Harriet Martineau

Economist as Storyteller and Traveler

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Martineau's Reputation in Her Own Day

Although Harriet Martineau is underappreciated today, her writings were widely read during her lifetime, and she was extremely influential in her own time. She successfully reached a wide popular audience with her monthly serials, published under the umbrella title *Illustrations of Political Economy*. She read widely in political economy and socialized and corresponded with many of the well-known political economists of her time, including James Mill and John Stuart Mill, Thomas Robert Malthus, William Godwin, and Francis Place.¹ She corresponded with a remarkable group of political and literary figures in both Britain (Prime Minister William Gladstone,

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1. In her autobiography, Martineau wrote with joy that her work was read by a young Princess Victoria (Martineau 1877, 2:118–19). See Levy and Peart (2022) for additional details about Martineau's difficult personal life.

John Bright) and America (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe). Perhaps the most balanced appreciation of her *Illustrations* is found in a lecture by William Stanley Jevons, who rightly read her as a follower of Adam Smith.²

It is no exaggeration to suggest that her ideas were sometimes controversial and attracted negative attention. Indeed, both her ideas and her character were flamboyantly attacked in *Fraser's Magazine* (Peart 2009), where she was the first of three named economists to be vilified in the *Fraser's* "Gallery."³ All three, Martineau, William Godwin, and Francis Place, were central to the controversy surrounding the implication of Malthus's *Essay on Population*. The central issue in the debate was at what age responsible people might marry. Martineau, like Malthus himself, advocated for couples to delay marriage until they could support their children. This seemingly innocuous recommendation was in direct contradiction to the orthodox Christian doctrine of that time that couples should marry as soon as possible to avoid the sin of fornication (Levy 1978).

Importantly, this controversy over marriage presupposed monogamy and a world without contraception.⁴ Had polygamy been practiced, choice space would have widened beyond the question of earlier or later marriage. This simple point needs to be understood to appreciate what Martineau accomplished in her travels to America, to which we turn next.

Martineau's Travels to America

Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* was a de facto textbook of political economy, formed from a monthly series of installments, a sequence of stories that began with the simplest of economic arrangements and gradually became more complex.⁵ Queen Victoria was one of her students (Logan 2002, 24). For our narrow purpose, Martineau's fourth installment of her *Illustrations of Political Economy*, titled *Demerara*, is the critical one. It was published a decade following the 1823

2. "Miss Martineau made a very different and clever attempt [from that of J. S. Mill and J. R. McCulloch], more than thirty years ago, to spread a knowledge of political economy in a series of tales entitled 'Illustrations of Political Economy.' The tales are very interesting and readable, and the doctrines clearly inculcated and sound. But like many other moral tales, they have not been so much read as they deserved, nor have they been read by the classes in whom we are concerned" Jevons ([1866] 1981, 7:51).

3. Martineau was number 42 in the 1830–38 *Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters* (Maclise and Maginn 1873). The two other named political economists were William Godwin, number 53, and Francis Place, number 66. The editor of the collected gallery, William Bates, suggested that the puzzling "Tydus-Pooh-Pooh," number 17, was a racialized caricature of political economist and linguist John Bowring (Maclise and Maginn 1873, 46), being attacked for his translations and advocacy of free trade in vocabulary, issues independent of what we discuss.

4. This world was idealized as late as Charles Darwin's denunciation of contraception (Peart and Levy 2008).

5. Martineau explained her procedure at the outset; see Martineau (1832, xi). To give some idea of her own estimation of her importance to the contemporary discussion, Martineau told a correspondent on January 2, 1864, that her "Martyr Age of the United States" (Martineau 1838) "created" J. S. Mill's interest in the case (Martineau 2007, 5:47).

rebellion of thousands of enslaved persons in the British colony of Demerara.⁶ It is important to separate what she wrote about slavery when in England and what she discovered on her American trip.

In *Demerara*, Martineau repeated the anti-slavery argument that property is a conventional right and “Man has no right to hold Man in property.” In this story, she developed a theme that she greatly expanded later. She suggested that the system of slavery would lead to rebellions because enslavers would not punish rebellious slaves but instead would protect their (enslavers’) assets. Thus, Martineau wrote, if the conventional punishment for murder were death by hanging, the slave owner might well prefer not to destroy his property but instead would attempt to disguise the crime and sell the enslaved person to a neighbor (Martineau 1833, 23–24). In her visit to the American South during the time of slavery, she was sensitive to political attempts to solve such collective action problems.

The economics lesson opens in a way unsurprising for anyone who has read Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981). Because the product of their labor did not affect their wealth, enslaved persons had little incentive to work diligently. But Martineau added a complication absent in Smith. Her story features a character, Alfred, the son of a slave owner who has *also* read Smith and has become aware of the incentive problem associated with using enslaved labor. Alfred offers a solution to this problem—taskwork with wages:

Mr. Bruce meanwhile was looking alternately at two gangs of slaves at work after a rather different manner. He was standing on the confines of two estates; and, in a field at a little distance, a company of slaves was occupied as usual; that is, bending over the ground, but to all appearance scarcely moving, silent, listless, and dull. At hand, the whole gang, from Cassius down to the youngest and weakest, were as busy as bees, and from them came as cheerful a hum, though the nature of their work rather resembled the occupation of beavers.

“Task-work with wages,” said Alfred, pointing to his own gang; “eternal labour, without wages,” pointing to the other. “It is not often that we have an example of the two systems before our eyes at the same moment. I need not put it to you which plan works the best.” (Martineau 1833, 2:69–70)⁷

6. Demerara, now Guyana, in August 1823 was the scene of one of the most massive uprisings in history. For an account of the rebellion, see Costa (1994). Seymour Drescher (2009, 256) wrote that “the death of this freeborn native Englishman [John Smith] was converted into decisive evidence that the brutal suppression of the rebellion had been an assault on native-born Christian Britons as well as overseas Christian West Indians. Missionary Smith was the abolitionists’ Archimedean fulcrum, which enabled them to raise popular contention in the New World to the level of the Old World. His death allowed the rebels to be identified not just as fellow men and brothers, but as fellow freedom-loving Christians. The Demerarans had reacted to their unnatural deprivation as would any freeborn Briton.”

7. Martineau observed such a link between effort and income in the American South when task wages were used as education, to teach the link between effort and reward during the period when formal

Thus, in *Demerara* she laid out two interesting hypotheses about slavery: insufficient punishment because of the property interest and the idea of an incentive-compatible slavery. During her American travels, she found instances of both. Neither of these are our primary concern, so we will focus on what she discovered.

Power, Sex, and Racial Politics

When Adam Smith explained how slavery could exist even though it would not be materially profitable, he appealed to the masters' desire to dominate (Smith [1776] 1981, 388). Smith did not explain what he meant by domination. Martineau, who had been invited to visit the American South with the hope of changing the views she expressed in *Demerara*,⁸ discovered something that filled the gap in Smith's argument. While traveling through the plantation South, Martineau was welcomed by the wives of plantation owners, who apparently spoke candidly about the sexual arrangements on plantations. On the basis of her conversations, she pointed to a terrible consequence of the lack of self-ownership. Plantation owners abused their female slaves sexually:

Every man who resides on his plantation may have his harem, and has every inducement of custom, and of pecuniary gain,* to tempt him to the common practice. Those who, notwithstanding, keep their homes undefiled may be considered as of incorruptible purity. (Martineau 1837, 2:112)

Martineau's footnote, marked by an asterisk, continues, "The law declares that the children of slaves are to follow the fortunes of the mother." Plantation owners were legally able to sell and bequeath their own enslaved children.

Martineau thus dropped the monogamy restriction of classical political economy and opened the door to the critical examination of racial politics:

A gentleman of the highest character, a southern planter, observed, in conversation with a friend, that little was known, out of bounds, of the reasons of the new laws by which emancipation was made so difficult as it is. He said that the very general connexion of white gentlemen with their female slaves introduced a mulatto race whose numbers would become dangerous, if the affections of their white parents were permitted to render them free. The liberty of emancipating them was therefore abolished, while that of selling them remained. (Martineau 1837, 2:118)

methods of education were outlawed (Martineau 1837, 2:157–58). In their study of slavery in the United States some 150 years later, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman discovered the payments that linked wages to output that Martineau had predicted in *Demerara* (Fogel and Engerman 1974, 239–42).

8. Martineau told her reader, "[M]y having published 'Demerara' was the main reason why they wished me to visit them. They desired me to see their 'peculiar institution' for myself: they would show me the best and the worst instances of its working; and their hope was — so they declared, — that I should publish exactly what I saw" (Martineau 1877, 2:19).

A father might well desire to emancipate his children, but the law closed off this possibility in order to prevent possible violent insurrection initiated by this mixed-race group.

Thus, as early as 1837, Martineau treated race as polychotomous, endogenous to the system of slavery. Recognizing that the white fathers of enslaved people might feel affection or obligation to their mixed-race children, she offered a straightforward explanation of why skin tone would matter in twenty-first-century estimates of income disparities.⁹ If skin tone is a long consequence of miscegenation, children of a white father were likely wealthier than children of two enslaved persons.¹⁰ In addition, when confronted by the “common boast,” as Martineau put it, that slavery improved the morals of Southerners—there were fewer prostitutes in Southern than in Northern cities—Martineau countered that there would be no reason to resort to prostitutes for a fee when one could purchase women for life and sell the resulting children (1837, 2:325–26).

Martineau’s accounts rendered clear, as few before her had done, the terrible consequences of slavery: violence and sexual abuse. Both her position and her character were consequently attacked. Thomas Carlyle referred to her “fanatisms” and criticized her anti-slavery argument.¹¹ Attacks on her work on America were collected and republished after the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.¹² Martineau’s obscurity among twenty-first-century economists may be explained by her gender, coupled with the severe attacks by canonical authorities, which served to bury the significance of her work,¹³ and by the fact that hypothesis discovery remains an uncommon procedure within economics.¹⁴

Yet with new genetic data sets and the ability to determine the geographic lineage of parents, Martineau’s hypothesis may be tested in the data. If she is correct, women from Africa would contribute more to the American gene pool than men from Africa. That prediction is borne out by current genetic research. A recent study concludes: “An Americas-wide African female sex-bias can be attributed to known accounts of rape of enslaved African women by slave-owners and other sexual exploitation” (Micheletti et al. 2020, 273).

9. See, for example, Darity (1998); Goldsmith, Hamilton and Darity (2007); Herring and Nynes (2017).

10. The first students at Wilberforce University, founded in 1856, included the children of enslaved mothers and their father-owners (McGinnis 1941). We owe the reference to William Darity.

11. See Carlyle (1881, 437–48) for his extremely offensive words about Martineau.

12. *The Pro-Slavery Argument* (1852), published after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, collected and republished the earlier attacks on Martineau after her visit. None of the responses denied her charge of sexual usage.

13. For instance, Alfred Marshall referred to Martineau as a “parasite” (Marshall 1890, 63).

14. For a recent examination of the significance and value of travelers’ tales, see Morgan (2022). Daniel Kuehn’s (2023) examination of Warren Nutter’s travels and the NBER Soviet growth study is particularly relevant because Rutledge Vining was both the important defender of the NBER practice as one of hypothesis discovery and a senior colleague of Nutter at the Thomas Jefferson Center at Virginia (Levy and Peart 2020).

Underappreciated by Whom?

Martineau's 1837 report about the sexual usage of American enslaved persons was noticed by the black historian and sociologist Carter Woodson in a 1918 article in his *Journal of Negro History*. Woodson was a careful reader of Martineau. However, there is little evidence that twentieth-century economists read her work; otherwise, they would not have been "startled" at what they found in the slave economy.¹⁵ Restricting ourselves to canonical economics, her insights were entirely neglected; rather, Martineau was subjected to intense criticism in her day and oblivion in ours. One instance will suffice. Under pressure from his funders, Gunnar Myrdal, who knew Martineau's work, if only from Woodson's report, moved the reference to sexual usage reported in her work from the body of *American Dilemma* to an appendix printed in a tiny font (Myrdal 1944, 1075; Morey 2021, 219).

To illustrate how the period of exclusion during which black scholars were absent from economics (Darity 1989; Malveaux 1991) has influenced our understanding of the early debates concerning race, we conducted a pair of JSTOR searches restricted (first) to the larger number of journals JSTOR considers as "economics" journals and (second) to the smaller number of journals it considers as "African American" journals. The first period is from the first issue of the journals in the respective fields through 1944, and then we pressed forward. The table reports cumulative citations. We searched for "Martineau" and "miscegenation."

| Period Ending | Cumulative Citations Economics | Cumulative Citations African American Studies |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1944 | 1* | 5 |
| 1960 | 1* | 7 |
| 1970 | 1* | 7 |
| 1980 | 1* | 8 |

The first citation in African American studies journals is Woodson (1918). We would have found many more articles had we searched for "Woodson" and "miscegenation" instead of "Martineau" and "miscegenation," with ten references in African American studies journals through 1944 and zero references through 1980 in economics journals. The only occurrence in economics (Newman 1944) cites Martineau as a supporter of the Union in the Civil War and miscegenation as an accusation that is not connected with Martineau's report. Because this has nothing to do with the issue, it is identified with an asterisk. Through 1980, there are no additional citations.

15. Robert Fogel (1989, 391–92): "I was also startled to discover the numerous ways in which masters relied on rewards to elicit labor—a device I had assumed was almost entirely absent since David Hume, Adam Smith, John E. Cairnes, and most of the other economic writers had identified this lack as the fatal flaw in slavery as an economic system."

The difference in citations for “Martineau” and “miscegenation” across fields is truly remarkable. Economists have been writing about slavery for as long as there has been an economics. Smith’s appeal to domination was not made substantial until Martineau’s account brought reports of sexual use of American slaves to the attention of the world. Her report was duly noted in African American studies journals and ignored in economics journals. Economists in the twentieth century were apparently hesitant to examine past evidence and debates concerning slavery, whereas those outside economics—who were perhaps excluded from the profession and tackled these issues as historians or sociologists—found the accounts of past commentators, accounts that came from within economics, illuminating.

Conclusion: The Consequence of Martineau’s Visit to America

The importance of hypothesis discovery continues to divide economists. The controversy engendered by Rutledge Vining (1949) over how best to discover and test hypotheses (Levy and Peart 2020) shows no sign of ending. The key issue is whether one first develops a theory that yields hypotheses or whether the data themselves yield the hypotheses in a discovery process. Whatever one’s views on that methodological issue, Martineau’s travel to America constituted a form of hypothesis discovery, one that had an impact on the economics of her time. Her novel about slavery offers no suggestion that slaves would be sexually used; she discovered this usage in America during her travels. Thomas Carlyle’s (1849) characterization of the political economy of his contemporaries reveals that he was very much aware of Martineau’s account.

As two of the most prominent essayists of their time, Carlyle and Martineau had initially enjoyed a cordial relationship, but that cordiality deteriorated into antipathy largely as a result of Martineau’s sympathies for enslaved people in America. In the 1849 essay in which he referred to political economy as the “dismal science,” Carlyle used the phrase “sweet blighted lilies, they are holding up their heads again” cruelly to characterize blacks in Jamaica. He continued, “Our beautiful black darlings are at last happy; with little labour except to the teeth” (1849, 671). His words echo Martineau’s report of “[a]n epitaph on a negro baby at Savannah,” which begins, “Sweet blighted lily” (1837, 2:222), as Carlyle mocked her description of the hopes of the baby’s heartbroken parents for the final resurrection.

Indeed, as noted at the outset, Martineau was vilified in *Fraser’s*; her originality, talent, and character were all questioned in her time. Even though her writings were extremely successful during her lifetime, today only specialists know of Martineau’s work, and economists have downplayed her originality and sophistication. Both her subject matter and her method of collecting information via travel proved controversial from the beginning of her career. Perhaps for these reasons, Martineau disappeared from the scholarly landscape for close to a century after her death. As eugenic thought and racism emerged and flourished among social scientists,

Martineau's important work was forgotten, and scholars lost the ability to appreciate her contributions. At least within economics, her work was neglected and eventually fell into near oblivion. It is now time to reevaluate and appreciate her important contributions.

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