

## MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND HARRIET MARTINEAU AT THE ORIGINS OF SOCIOLOGY

*di Milena Gammaitoni\**

### Abstract

Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Martineau still need to be included in the history of sociology, despite their innovative contribution to the field. The fact that they are still kept outside the canon needs to be the subject of future reflection and analyses regarding the dynamics of the social construction/recognition of female genius, which, being such a vast issue, is impossible to deal with here .

Mary Wollstonecraft , like her contemporary J-J Rousseau, can be located with considerable authority within the field of pre-sociology mainly because she was the first person who, in the 1700s, described the social dynamics that prevented the egalitarian education of men and women who were thus prevented from learning how to exercise rational thought and act freely in both time and space. Martineau, who changed the order of epistemological discourse, is often mentioned simply as the translator into English of Auguste Comte's Course on Positive Philosophy, though she was the first, before Emile Durkheim was even born, to carry out in-depth empirical research, between 1834 and 1837, regarding the implementation of democracy in the United States. During the long sea voyage between Europe and America, she drew up a detailed account of the sociological methodology she would adopt during her stay in the USA.

It is a commonly acknowledged fact that the history of sociology has been written mainly from a predominantly male perspective, although, in the 19th and 20th centuries, many female sociologists have managed to implement views of society and original empirical research capable of anticipating the development of concepts, theories, and practices relating to modernity

### Keywords

history of sociology, women sociologist, epistemology

\* MILENA GAMMAITONI is Associate Professor University Roma Tre, Departement of Education.

Email: [milena.gammaitoni@uniroma3.it](mailto:milena.gammaitoni@uniroma3.it)

DOI: [10.13131/unipi/zr3-mm11](https://doi.org/10.13131/unipi/zr3-mm11)

1. MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, (HOXTON 1759-LONDON 1797) PRE-SOCIOLOGY. EQUAL EDUCATION AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS<sup>1</sup>

Mary Wollstonecraft, a scrupulous observer of English daily life and of the French Revolution, became the intellectual mother of 20th-century feminism, following the rediscovery of her treatise on women's rights *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Her thinking is marked essentially by social criticism, in keeping with the prerequisites of contemporary sociological analysis: a description and interpretation of historical and political facts, processes of socialisation, an analysis of the relational dynamics between different social classes within the private and public spheres, the ability to predict their evolution and to propose solutions to the problems that have emerged.

In 1787, she published *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with reflections on female conduct in the more important duties of life*,<sup>2</sup> entering fully into the debate of the time, initiated in France by J. J. Rousseau. Wollstonecraft, in the wake of Lockean empiricism, according to which the mind was simply a *tabula rasa*, emphasised the importance of the environment in which individuals were brought up and held that the education they received played a fundamental role in their formation. The book is composed of essays on young women's education and moral and intellectual development. Although questions of morality and etiquette prevail, it contains basic instructions regarding the education of girls and how to take care of newborn babies.

Wollstonecraft was self-taught; she spent her childhood on a farm in the English countryside, growing up in a challenging environment with a violent, alcoholic father and a problematic mother who died young. When her father's business failed, Wollstonecraft was obliged to work as a governess to support herself. Her reflections on the education provided for boys and girls of the nascent bourgeoisie inspired her to open her own school for girls (mixed schools were not allowed at the time)

Having carefully observed the students in her school, she decided to

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is drawn partially from Gammaitoni M., *Storie di vita di Artiste europee. Dal medioevo alla contemporaneità*, Cleup, 2013, Springer, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> The British Manuals of proper behaviour published in the 1700s derive from the older literary tradition of religious advice and precepts. During the second half of that century, there was a significant flourishing of such publications, which also included Wollstonecraft's book, which, however, obtained a rather modest success: only one review. It was reprinted only once, apart from the publication of some extracts in popular magazines of the time. It was then republished in the 1970s, in the wake of European feminism and a keen interest in feminist movements and their history.

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publish her ideas regarding the education of women who, in her opinion, were endowed with learning abilities in no way inferior to those of men. Among her famous statements we find:

It is time to effect a revolution in female manners, time to restore to them their lost dignity, and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. (...) Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?<sup>3</sup>

Starting from personal and work experiences, she was convinced that many social inequalities stemmed from education, that the reason for the subjugation of women was to be found in their ignorance and exclusion from the *civitas*.

In 1788, Wollstonecraft published *Original Stories from Real Life*, a book dedicated to girls and aimed at educating them morally using exemplary stories of practical life, including ways of treating animals, the importance of charity, respect for the poor and benevolence.

She followed the French Revolution from the beginning with great passion, and soon wrote her first political book: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, where she attacked the privileges of the nobility, upheld the new republican regime and united her voice to those of the defenders of the Revolution. In 1792, she published a second volume on the question of human rights dedicated to the condition of women, today considered one of the first writings of feminist philosophy: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*<sup>4</sup>.

She responds, in particular, to J.-J. Rousseau, who in his *Émile* (1762) argued that women should be educated to be compliant. She refutes Sophie's role in *Emile*, which did not even conceive the idea of the independent woman. She pointed out that the moral character of women, like that of men, was capable of developing thanks only to serious intellectual work. Her thinking is undoubtedly modern.

She hoped for a national education system, mixed schools, where everyone, regardless of social position, might receive a basic education. Later, she believed the most gifted might continue their academic studies while those less academically inclined could learn a trade<sup>5</sup>. People, she held, this time agreeing with Rousseau, were fundamentally good, and that the same energy that made a man a scoundrel might make him useful

<sup>3</sup> See., Wollstonecraft M., *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Moral and Political Subjects*, Joseph Johnson 1792, p. 349.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> See Cantarella E., *Mary Wollstonecraft, Sui diritti delle donne*, RCS, 2010 p. 68.

to society if society were wisely organised<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, the poor were not poor because it was their nature to be so, nor did poverty ennoble the soul. On the contrary, the soul was brutalised when the economic system was inflexible.

By now Wollstonecraft's attention focuses, above all, on the origin and dynamics of what determined the social inferiority of women. In her opinion, before claiming their legal and political rights, women needed recognition of their right to a childhood where the body and mind were trained to be strong and not fall a prey to fragility and pliability.

[...].But was their understanding once emancipated from the slavery to which the pride and sensuality of man and their short sighted desire, like that of dominion in tyrants, of present sway, has subjected them, we should probably read of their weaknesses with surprise. I must be allowed to pursue the argument a little farther. Women, it is true, obtaining power by unjust means, by practising or fostering vice, evidently lose the rank which reason would assign them, and they become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants. They lose all simplicity, all dignity of mind, in acquiring power, and act as men are observed to act when they have been exalted by the same means. It is time to effect a revolution in female manners, time to restore to them their lost dignity, and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. [...]/To become respectable, the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say, that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the MODEST slaves of opinion.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. HARRIET MARTINEAU (NORWICH 1802- AMBLESIDE 1876) . SOCIETY IN AMERICA, THE FIRST INSTANCE OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY

Harriet Martineau knew Mary Wollstonecraft's work and life very well, so much so, that she wrote about her with admiration and regret, referring to her as an example to keep in mind when undertaking political engagement aimed at obtaining recognition of women's social and legal rights. She said that in spite of the difficulties caused by the faults of many women and the fears of men, that she would go on seeking, as long as she lived, to make it easier for others to follow than it had been for poor Mary

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<sup>6</sup> Op cit., p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. p. 401.

Wollstonecraft to begin<sup>8</sup>.

As Ginevra Conti Odorisio, the first in Italy to translate and publish two volumes on Harriet Martineau, writes, it is surprising how this important intellectual, economist, writer, philosopher and sociologist, trained in positivist circles, has been forgotten. She was the translator of an abridged version of Auguste Comte's *Course in Positive Philosophy* (1853-57), and her sagacious interpreter<sup>9</sup>(Ferrarotti 1968). Thanks to her, Comte became popular in the English-Speaking world, so much so, that he thanked her in an exchange of letters, admitting that she had interpreted and understood him better than he had himself. Furthermore, he did not oppose Martineau's decision to omit the misogynistic statements the great philosopher had written when addressing the issue of the rational inability of women. Despite this flaw, Martineau acknowledged him as a *maitre à penser*, fundamental for the progress of knowledge. For Martineau this translation permitted her to surpass, in the name of Unitarianism, the education she had received from her family. In her *Autobiography* she declares having read Thomas Malthus at the age of 15, and from that moment on, having begun to reflect in a sociological and political manner.

At sixteen, she suffered a serious hearing loss, but, over time she discovered that, unexpectedly, the use of an ear trumpet actually helped her to establish confidential relationships during field research, because the people she interviewed were inclined to be more accepting because of it.

In 1822, she started collaborating with the “Monthly Repository”, a magazine based on Unitarianism, favouring religious freedom and the diffusion of the reformist ideas of Beccaria, Bentham, Blackstone, Malthus and Owen. In 1825, she began to devote herself entirely to journalism, also because she needed to earn a living following the failure of her family's small textile factory. Here she published a monthly column called *Illustrations of Political Economy* aimed at informing the general public – using 24 stories enriched by illustrations she created herself – about the thinking of Thomas Malthus, James Mill, David Ricardo, Adam Smith. These stories sold more copies than the novels of Charles Dickens. Each of the characters in her stories represented one of four economic principles: production, distribution, exchange and consumption. The series of stories was translated into various languages and earned her considerable fame. Her illustrations alone made her political position perfectly clear: she believed in the ideals of socialism

<sup>8</sup> Martineau H., *Autobiography*, 1877, Smyth Elder and Co., 1877, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Ferrarotti F., *Trattato di sociologia*, Utet, 1968.

and liberalism, defended the weakest social classes, opposed slavery, as immoral and economically inefficient system, prostitution and the criminalisation and oppression of women who were denied their rights of citizenship because their gender was deemed weak and inferior to that of men. She also wrote against the mistreatment of people held in prison and child labour. When it came to the condition of women, she wrote:

If a test of civilisation be sought, none can be so sure as the condition of that half of society over which the other half has power,—from the exercise of the right of the strongest. [...] While woman's intellect is confined, her morals crushed, her health ruined, her weaknesses encouraged, and her strength punished, she is told that her lot is cast in the paradise of women<sup>10</sup>.

Martineau's most important works, as far as the history of sociology is concerned, are undoubtedly *Society in America 2 vols.* (1836), issued by the English publishers who published de Tocqueville, and *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838).

These works were written while she continued to work on her literary and instructive activities in the fields of economics and politics.

Between 1834 and 1836, she travelled around the USA to carry out detailed field research aimed at investigating the living conditions of the people, the degrees of justice and well-being found among the different strata of society, as direct exemplifications of the principles of the American Constitution and, therefore, of the achievement of democracy.

This was the time when Alexis de Tocqueville was writing his *Democracy in America* (1835), although he spent only six months engaging in direct observation of the real living conditions of Americans.

Harriet Martineau, after the death of her father, always stubbornly determined not to marry, remained independent, free to travel and to decide how to lead her life. During the three years she spent in United States devoting herself to her research, she conducted 300 interviews, was received by President Madison and by some of the highest-ranking members of the Supreme Court. She stayed in villages and cities, was hosted by families of every social class, even entered prisons to obtain first-hand information regarding the conditions of the inmates. She arrived in the USA well prepared for her undertaking. During her three-month sea voyage she drew up a methodological plan, a useful guide to her future observations in the field, the structure of the interviews she would administer and she intended describing the families and environments she would visit.

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<sup>10</sup> Conti Odorisio G., *Harriet Martineau. La Società in America*, Armando, 2019, p. 41.

Her analyses of the living conditions of the Americans she met anticipated Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, because she clearly highlighted the social injustices undergone by labourers, both male and female, and by the poorest and most marginalised members of society. She designed and carried out a multidimensional, multivariate, conceptually oriented research project aimed at detecting the moral values upon which social, political and religious institutions were based.

Her method involved comparing the principles declared in the American Constitution and the reality of people's lives. With regards to this she wrote:

In seeking for methods by which I might communicate what I have observed in my travels [...] two expedients occurred to me; both of which I have adopted. One is, to compare the existing state of society in America with the principles upon which it is professedly founded; thus testing Institutions, Morals and Manners by an undisputable, instead of an arbitrary standard and securing to myself the same point of view with my readers of both nations. [...] The other method by which I propose to lessen my own responsibility, is to enable my readers to judge for themselves, better that I can for them, what my testimony is worth. For this purpose, I offer a brief account of my travels, with dates in full; and a report of the principal means I enjoyed of obtaining a knowledge of the country<sup>11</sup>.

In the chapter called “Morals of Slavery” she brings to light the paradox of slavery when she asks, “What social virtues are possible in a society where injustice is the primary characteristic?”<sup>12</sup> With cutting irony she ridicules the alleged tolerance of Americans towards their slaves, “when the inherent injustice of the system extinguishes all others and nourishes a whole harvest of false morals towards the rest of society”<sup>13</sup>.

These observations of hers expose the hypocrisy of a society still very backward in matters of civil rights, by emphasising the degradation of sexual behaviour, still unresolved and more relevant than ever today – evident in drifts of slavery found in the trafficking of foreign women and the commercialisation of online pornography – to the subjection of all oppressed and subjected women, to the exploitation of children.

The method she advocates using in order to measure progress in society is based on three points of analysis: 1) the status of those who hold the least power in society; 2) popular perceptions of authority and autonomy; 3) access to resources that permit people to lead a dignified life.

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<sup>11</sup> Martineau H., *Society in America*, Musiacum Books, 2020, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., p. 13

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., p. 13

In the course of this tour, I visited almost every kind of institution. The prisons of Auburn, Philadelphia and Nashville; the insane and almost every considerable place: the literary and scientific institutions; the factories of the north; the plantations of the south; the farms of the west I lived in houses which might be called palaces, in log-houses, and in a farm-house. I travelled much in wagons, as well as stages; also on horseback, and in some of the best and worst of steamboats. (..) I was present at orations, at land sales, and in the slave market. I was in frequent attendance on the Supreme Court and the Senate; and witnessed some of the proceedings of state legislatures. Above all, I was received into the bosom of many families, not as a stranger, but as a daughter or a sister (...) It would be nearly impossible to relate whom I knew, during my travels. Nearly every eminent man in politics, science and literature, and almost every distinguished woman, would grace my list. I have respected and beloved friends of each political party; and of nearly every religious denomination; among slave-holders, colonisationists, and abolitionists; among farmers, lawyers, merchants, professors, and clergy. I travelled among several tribes of Indians; and spent months in the southern States, with negroes ever at my heels. Such were my means of information. With regard to my power of making use of them, I have but a few words to say. It has been frequently mentioned to me that my being a woman was one disadvantage; and my being previously heard of, another. In this I do not agree.

I am sure, I have seen much more of domestic life than could possibly have been exhibited to any gentleman travelling through the country. The nurser, the boudoir, the kitchen, are all excellent schools in which to learn the morals and manners of a people.<sup>14</sup>

In 1839, she published the novel *Deerbrook*, travelled around Europe and, while in Venice, began to notice the first symptoms of an illness which would affect her for a long time. She did not renounce her political commitment to the abolition of slavery, to the relief of the poor and the assertion of women's rights. She continued writing for the "American Anti-Slavery Standard", highlighting characteristics shared by slavery in the colonies and the classist oppression of the English proletariat and the subaltern position of women: two moral evils that she believed corrupted and degraded both whites and blacks, both the oppressed and the oppressors.

She supported the Italian Risorgimento from both a moral and an economic point of view, going so far as to teach in the Italian school founded in London by Giuseppe Mazzini with whom she remained in

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<sup>14</sup> Martineau H., *Society in America*, Musiacum Books, 2020, p. 14.



epistolary contact for a long time.

As soon as her health improved, she travelled to Egypt and the Holy Land (1846-47), publishing *Eastern Life, Present and Past* in 1848, a book where she traced the historical origins of religions.

Her intellectual production examined micro and macro visions of society. It delved into the study of religions, without expressing value judgments, but as a constant manifestation of a Weberian style of understanding while retracing the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In *Oriental Life present and past* (1838) and in *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development*, she confessed her personal abandonment of the Christian faith in favour of mesmerism and phrenology (which she believed might help cure her illness).

In 1852, she became a columnist for the "Daily News", where she declared herself favourable to the Crimean War. From 1867 on, she became a public spokesperson in favour of feminist causes, promoted various petitions for the right to vote in agreement with John Stuart Mill. Her political activity made an important contribution towards two fundamental achievements: the access of women to school management boards and the *Married Woman Act* which permitted married women to manage their own money.

From 1837, well before *The Subjection of Women* by J. Stuart Mills (1870) appeared, Martineau outlined a set of political proposals: that women should unite in the pursuit of self-determination and the concrete achievement of collective rights, demand that parliament reform all the laws concerning them; equal education, freedom to work, equality with men in civil, criminal and political matters, the abolition of arranged marriages and legalized prostitution. This way she clearly highlighted the fact that the female condition was an unresolved issue even in democracies.

She rebelled against all the taboos of her day, to the point of declaring that she had never dreamed of marrying, because her mission was to study, travel, learn about the world and teach. She went so far as to call herself the happiest single woman in England. In *Household Education* she addressed the topic of female education and published a history of contemporary England, known as the *History of Peace*.

When, in 1855, she fell ill again due to a heart condition, knowing that she might die at any given moment, in a handful of months she wrote *Autobiography*, which was published posthumously in 1877.

According to Conti Odorisio, Martineau's works may be classified and studied following three main strands: politics, economics and civilization.

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Though she had an unshakable faith in the benefits of the democratic system, she did not hesitate to expose its defects. She pointed out the similarity between the domination of men over women and the rapport between slave-owners and slaves. She noticed the contradiction in the parliamentary system which, although it was based on the consensus of the people, excluded women. In the field of economics she advocated a form of production that should not be based on the exploitation of labour, but on respect for people and nature, the latter violated, too, by colonisers greedy for wealth. She discussed the moral principles of the economy, in a harsh criticism of the two societies she knew best, England and the United States, she even went so far as to praise the value of idleness as opposed to the unbridled production and reproduction of a society based on private property alone. In her opinion, the priceless asset of free time and entertainment needed to be taken into due consideration. This she believed could be achieved only if cooperation and work were organised collectively and became less invasive of private life. She advocated an equal distribution of goods, although she was aware that the inhabitants of the New World would not easily renounce the accumulation of personal wealth.

The paradox of this historiographical exclusion, is, as Bourdieu wrote<sup>15</sup>, the result of the concrete domination wielded by males within the managerial spheres of power and academic life. This predominance led to a monolithic all-male version of history regardless of the fact that it was often female scholars who won fame and gained the esteem of their contemporaries in their lifetimes. This has meant that their existences have remained both unexpressed and marginal to public discourse although these women were active within the intellectual and editorial circles of their times.

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<sup>15</sup> See BOURDIEU P., *Il dominio maschile*, Feltrinelli, 2017.

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