

The Underappreciated Economics of Harriet Martineau, Storyteller and Traveler^{*}

David Levy

Sandra Peart

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^{*}Based on a recent paper on underappreciated economists in the *Independent Review*.

Martineau in Her Time

- 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 popular audience with her monthly serials, published under the umbrella title *Illustrations of Political Economy*.
- She was well-read in political economy and she socialized and corresponded with many of the well-known political economists of her time, including James and John Stuart Mill, Thomas Robert Malthus, William Godwin, and Francis Place

Jevons' Favorable Judgment Stands Out

- “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).

Controversy

- Both her ideas and her character were flamboyantly attacked in *Fraser's Magazine*
 - She was the first of three named economists to be vilified in the *Fraser's* 1830–38 *Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters* (Number 42)
 - William Godwin (#53) and Francis Place (#66) are central in the Malthusian controversy.
- She is portrayed with witch-like characteristics, cat upon her shoulder as she heats a cauldron over a fire. (Peart 2009)
- *Fraser's* published Carlyle's "Negro Question," (1849) with the "dismal science" tag.



Alfred Croquis del.

Harriet Martineau

Martineau's insights: i) When to Marry?

- Martineau, like Malthus, advocated that couples delay marriage until they could support their children.
 - This contradicted the doctrine that couples should marry early to avoid sin (Levy 1978).
- At what age responsible people might prudently marry?
 - The controversy over marriage presupposed monogamy and a world without contraception.
 - A world without contraception was idealized as late as Charles Darwin's (Peart and Levy 2008).
 - With polygamy the choice space would have widened beyond the question of earlier or later marriage.
 - She found de facto polygamy in America

ii) Slavery, in Demerara

- Martineau's 4th installment of *Illustrations of Political Economy, Demerara*, is critical.
- It was published a decade following the 1823 rebellion of thousands of enslaved persons in the British colony of Demerara.
- It is important to separate what she wrote about slavery when in England and what she discovered on her trip to America.

Slavery and Collective Action

- In *Demerara*, Martineau echoed the anti-slavery “Man has no right to hold Man in property.”
- She suggested that the system of slavery would lead to violence because enslavers would not punish rebellious slaves but instead would protect their (enslavers’) assets.
 - Martineau wrote that 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.

Awareness of the Collective Action Problem

- The economics lesson opens following Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*
 - 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

Awareness matters in her novel

- Mr. Bruce meanwhile was looking alternately at two gangs of slaves at work after a rather different manner.
... 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).

In America

- 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 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).

iii) Martineau's visit to the slave states

- “[M]y having published ‘Demerara’ was the main reason why they [enslavers] 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).

The sexual consequences of slavery

- 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)

The ☆

- 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.

The long tail of sexual slavery

- “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)
- A father might well desire to emancipate his children, but the law closed off this possibility.
- The collective action problem seems to be the possible insurrection of the mixed race group.

Why Martineau Matters to Us

- 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.

iv) Martineau on Ireland

- Marshall disparaged Martineau but noted that she read the relevant economics (Marshall 1890).
 - Martineau's interest and argument parallel that of William Nassau Senior.
- Senior focused on the tax that supported the Anglican Church in Ireland.
- He argued observant Roman Catholics in Ireland were forced to support their religion with voluntary donations and singled out the fees for officiating at a marriage
 - Taxes were used to support a religion indifferent to their interests at best (Bowley 1937).
- Encouraging earlier marriage would speed population growth.

Ireland, the novel

- The collective action problem is *everywhere* in Martineau, perhaps nowhere as obviously in her novel, *Ireland*, in which a priest attempts to defend the Church's position on marriage
 - “The charge is false,” replied the priest. “My brethren and I do not make marriages, though we celebrate them with a view to the glory of God and the fulfilment of his holy commandment. We are supposed to know nothing of an intended marriage till requested to solemnize it; and to refuse to discharge our office, with all the customs appertaining to it, would be to encourage sin.”
- However, the character Mr. Orme replies that “by receiving your emoluments chiefly in the shape of marriage fees,” the Church “expose[d]” itself “to the suspicion of encouraging early marriage,” a suspicion even more credible due to its “known tremendous power over the minds of [its] flocks” (1832, p. 115).
 - This is precisely Senior's point.

Inherent inferiority vs. institutions in 19th century economics

- Martineau's report of her travels to Ireland reveals that she was also immersed in the older economics literature when she challenged George Berkeley's claim in the *Querist* that there was a natural foundation to the supposed Irish disposition to slough
- Martineau counters Berkeley's Query #512-514 (Foulis) where Berkeley suggests the Irish, like the Tartars, inherited a natural propensity to indolence. (Martineau 1852, p. 57)
- This is precisely the question that would preoccupy nineteenth century economists, e.g. J.S. Mill versus W. R. Greg—on the Irish, women, and former slaves.

Thank you!

- Comments welcome!
- DavidMLevy@gmail.com
- SPeart@richmond.edu