Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) has been called the “first woman sociologist.” Although perhaps best known for her translation of August Comte’s *Cours de philosophie positive* into English, Martineau made important but sometimes overlooked contributions to social science methodology and comparative sociology. *Society in America*, the book from which the following contribution is drawn, is a wide ranging treatise based on Martineau’s observations of the expression of nineteenth century American values and morality. Martineau strongly opposed racial and gender inequality and sought to understand how a society that claimed to value freedom and equality in principle was so discriminatory and exclusionary in practice.

**SOCIETY IN AMERICA**

Harriet Martineau

In seeking for methods by which I might communicate what I have observed in my travels, without offering any pretension to teach the English, or judge the Americans, 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 on which it is professedly founded; thus testing Institutions, Morals, and Manners by an indisputable, instead of an arbitrary standard, and securing to myself the same point of view with my readers of both nations.

In working according to this method, my principal dangers are two. I am in danger of not fully apprehending the principles on which society in the United States is founded; and of erring in the application of these of the facts which came under my notice. In the last respect, I am utterly hopeless of my own accuracy. It is in the highest degree improbable that my scanty gleanings in the wide field of American society should present a precisely fair sample of the whole. I can only explain that I have spared no pains to discover the truth, in both divisions of my task; and invite correction, in all errors of fact. This I earnestly do; holding myself, of course, an equal judge with others on matters of opinion.

My readers, on their part, will bear in mind that, in showing discrepancies between an actual condition and a pure and noble theory of society, I am not finding fault with the Americans, as falling behind the English, or the French, or any other nation. I decline the office of censor altogether. I dare not undertake it. Nor will my readers, I trust, regard the subject otherwise than as a compound of philosophy and fact. If we can all, for once, allay our personal feelings, dismiss our too great regard to mutual opinion, and put praise and blame as nearly as possible out of the question, more that is advantageous to us may perhaps be learned than by any invidious comparisons and proud judgments that were ever instituted and pronounced.

The other method by which I propose to lessen my own responsibility, is to enable my readers to judge for themselves, better than 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...

... In the course of this tour, I visited almost every kind of institution. The prisons of Auburn, Philadelphia, and Nashville; the insane and other hospitals of 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 traveled much in wagons, as well as stages; also on horseback, and in some of the best and worst of steamboats. I saw weddings, and christenings; the gatherings of the richer at watering places, and the humbler at country festivals. 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. I am qualified, if any one is, to testify to the virtues and the peace of the homes of the United States; and let it not be thought a breach of confidence, if I should be found occasionally to have spoken of these out of the fullness of my heart.

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, colonizationists, and abolitionists; among farmers, lawyers, merchants, professors, and clergy. I traveled among several tribes of Indians; and spent months in the southern States, with negroes ever at my heels.

Such were my means of information...

Morals of Slavery

This title is not written down in a spirit of mockery; though there appears to be a mockery somewhere, when we contrast slavery with the principles and the rule which are the test of all American institutions:—the principles that all men are born free and equal; that rulers derive their just powers from the consent of the governed; and the rule of reciprocal justice. This discrepancy between principles and practice needs no more words. But the institution of slavery exists; and what we have to see is what the morals are of the society which is subject to it.

What social virtues are possible in a society of which injustice is the primary characteristic? In a society which is divided into two classes, the servile and the imperious?

The most obvious is Mercy. Nowhere, perhaps, can more touching exercises of mercy be seen than here. It must be remembered that the greater number of slave-holders have no other idea than of holding slaves. Their fathers did it: they themselves have never known the colored race treated otherwise than as inferior beings, born to work for and to tease the whites; helpless, improvident, open to no higher inducements than indulgence and praise; capable of nothing but entire dependence. The good affections of slave-holders like these show themselves in the form of mercy; which is as beautiful to witness as mercy, made a substitute for justice, can ever be. I saw endless manifestations of mercy, as well as of its opposite. The thoughtfulness of masters, mistresses, and their children about, not only the comforts, but the indulgences of their slaves, was a frequent subject of admiration with me. Kind masters are liberal in the expenditure of money, and (what is better) of thought, in gratifying the whims and fancies of their negroes. They make large sacrifices occasionally for the social or domestic advantage of their people; and use great forbearance in the exercise of the power conferred upon them by law and custom.

Nothing struck me more than the patience of slave-owners. In this virtue they probably surpass the whole Christian world;—I mean in their patience with their slaves; for one cannot much praise their patience with the abolitionists, or with the tariff; or in some other cases of political vexation. When I considered how they love to be called “fiery southerners,” I could not but marvel at their mild forbearance under the hourly provocations to which they are liable
in their homes. It is found that such a degree of this virtue can be obtained only by long habit. Persons from New England, France, or England, becoming slave-holders, are found to be the most severe masters and mistresses, however good their tempers may always have appeared previously. They cannot, like the native proprietor, sit waiting half an hour for the second course, or see everything done in the worst possible manner; their rooms dirty, their property wasted, their plans frustrated, their infants slighted, themselves deluded by artifices,—they cannot, like the native proprietor, endure all this unruffled. It seems to me that every slave-holder’s temper is subjected to a discipline which must either ruin or perfect it. While we know that many tempers are thus ruined, and must mourn for the unhappy creatures who cannot escape from their tyranny, it is evident, on the other hand, that many tempers are to be met with which should shame down and silence for ever the irritability of some whose daily life is passed under circumstances of comparative ease.

This mercy, indulgence, patience, was often pleaded to me in defense of the system, or in aggravation of the faults of intractable slaves. The fallacy of this is so gross as not to need exposure anywhere but on the spot. I was heart-sick of being told of the ingratitude of slaves, and wary of explaining that indulgence can never atone for injury: that the extremest pampering, for a life-time, is no equivalent for rights withheld, no reparation for irreparable injustice. What are the greatest possible amounts of finery, sweetmeats, dances, gratitudes, and kind words and looks, in exchange for political, social, and domestic existence? For body and spirit? Is it not true that the life is more than meat, and the body than raiment?...

... A common question put to me by amiable ladies was, “Do not you find the slaves generally very happy?” They never seemed to have been asked, or to have asked themselves, the question with which I replied:—”Would you be happy with their means?”...

... Of course, in a society where things like these are said and done by its choicest members, there is a prevalent unconsciousness of the existing wrong. The daily and hourly plea is of good intentions towards the slaves; of innocence under the aspersions of foreigners. They are as sincere in the belief that they are injured as their visitors are cordial in their detestation of the morals of slavery. Such unconsciousness of the milder degrees of impurity and injustice as enables ladies and clergymen of the highest character to speak and act as I have related, is a sufficient evidence of the prevalent grossness of morals. One remarkable indication of such blindness was the almost universal mention of the state of the Irish to me, as a worse case than American slavery. I never attempted, of course, to vindicate the state of Ireland: but I was surprised to find no one able, till put in the way, to see the distinction between political misgovernment and personal slavery: between exasperating a people by political insult, and possessing them, like brutes, for pecuniary profit. The unconsciousness of guilt is the worst of symptoms, where there are means of light to be had.

The degradation of the women is so obvious a consequence of the evils disclosed above, that the painful subject need not be enlarged on. By the degradation of women, I do not mean to imply any doubt of the purity of their manners. There are reasons, plain enough to the observer, why their manners should be even peculiarly pure. They are all married young, from their being out-numbered by the other sex: and there is ever present an unfortunate servile class of their own sex to serve the purpose of licentiousness, so as to leave them untempted. Their degradation arises, not from their own conduct, but from that of all other parties about them. Where the generality of men carry secrets which their wives must be the last to know; where the busiest and more engrossing concerns of life must wear one aspect to the one sex, and another to the other, there is an end to all wholesome confidence and sympathy, and
woman sinks to be the ornament of her husband’s house, the domestic manager of his establishment, instead of being his all-sufficient friend. I am speaking not only of what I suppose must necessarily be; but of what I have actually seen. I have seen, with heart-sorrow, the kind politeness, the gallantry, so insufficient to the loving heart, with which the wives of the south are treated by their husbands. I have seen the horror of a woman’s having to work,—to exert the faculties which her Maker gave her;—the eagerness to ensure her unearned ease and rest; the deepest insult which can be offered to an intelligent and conscientious woman. I know the tone of conversation which is adopted towards women; different in its topics and its style from that which any man would dream of offering to any other man. I have heard the boast of the chivalrous consideration in which women are held throughout their woman’s paradise; and seen something of the anguish of crushed pride, of the conflict of bitter feelings with which such boasts have been listened to by those whose aspirations teach them the hollowness of the system. The gentlemen are all the while unaware that women are not treated in the best possible manner among them: and they will remain thus blind as long as licentious intercourse with the lowest of the sex unfit them for appreciating the highest. A lady who, brought up elsewhere to use her own faculties, and employ them on such objects as she thinks proper, and who has more knowledge and more wisdom that perhaps any gentleman of her acquaintance, told me of the disgust with which she submits to the conversation which is addressed to her, under the idea of being fit for her; and how she solaces herself at home, after such provocation, with the silent sympathy of books. A father of promising young daughters, whom he sees likely to be crushed by the system, told me, in a tone of voice which I shall never forget, that women there might as well be turned into the street, for anything they are fit for. There are reasonable hopes that his children may prove an exception. One gentleman who declares himself much interested in the whole subject, expresses his horror of the employment of women in the northern States, for useful purposes. He told me that the same force of circumstances which, in the region he inhabits, makes me independent, increases the dependence of women, and will go on to increase it. Society is there, he declared, “always advancing toward orientalism.”

Of course, the children suffer, perhaps the most fatally of all, under the slave system. What can be expected from little boys who are brought up to consider physical courage the highest attribute of manhood; pride of section and of caste its loftiest grace; the slavery of a part of society essential to the freedom of the rest; justice of less account than generosity; and humiliation in the eyes of men the most intolerable of evils? What is to be expected of little girls who boast of having got a negro flogged for being impertinent to them, and who are surprised at the “ungentlemanly” conduct of a master who maims his slave? Such lessons are not always taught expressly. Sometimes the reverse is expressly taught. But this is what the children in a slave country necessarily learn from what passes around them; just as the plainest girls in a school grow up to think personal beauty the most important of all endowments, in spite of daily assurances that the charms of the mind are all that are worth regarding.

The children of slave countries learn more and worse still. It is nearly impossible to keep them from close intercourse with the slaves; and the attempt is rarely made. The generality of slaves are as gross as the total absence of domestic sanctity might be expected to render them. They do not dream of any reserves with children. The consequences are inevitable.

One of the absolutely inevitable results of slavery is a disregard of human rights; an inability even to comprehend them. Probably the southern gentry, who declare that the presence of slavery enhances the love of freedom; that freedom can be duly estimated only
where a particular class can appropriate all social privileges; that, to use the words of one of them, “they know too much of slavery to be slaves themselves,” are sincere enough in such declarations; and if so, it follows that they do not know what freedom is. They may have the benefit of the alternative,—of not knowing what freedom is, and being sincere; or of knowing what freedom is, and not being sincere. I am disposed to think that the first is the more common case...

Women

If a test of civilization 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. Tried by this test, the American civilization appears to be of a lower order than might have been expected from some other symptoms of its social state. The Americans have, in the treatment of women, fallen below, not only their own democratic principles, but the practice of some parts of the Old World.

The unconsciuosity of both parties as to the injuries suffered by women at the hands of those who hold the power is a sufficient proof of the low degree of civilization in this important particular at which they rest. 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: and there is no country in the world where there is so much boasting of the “chivalrous” treatment she enjoys. That is to say,—she has the best place in stagecoaches: when there are not chairs enough for everybody, the gentlemen stand: she hears oratorical flourishes on public occasions about wives and home, and apostrophes to woman: her husband’s hair stands on end at the idea of her working, and he toils to indulge her with money: she has liberty to get her brain turned by religions excitements, that her attention may be diverted from morals, politics, and philosophy; and, especially her morals are guarded by the strictest observance of propriety in her presence. In short, indulgence is given her as a substitute for justice. Her case differs from that of the slave, as to the principle just so far as this; that the indulgence is large and universal, instead of petty and capricious. In both cases, justice is denied on no better plea that the right of the strongest. In both cases, the acquiescence of the many, and the burning discontent of the few, of the oppressed, testify, the one to the actual degradation of the class, and the other to its fitness for the enjoyment of human rights.

The intellect of woman is confined by an unjustifiable restriction of both methods of education,—by express teaching, and by the discipline of circumstance. The former, though prior in the chronology of each individual, is a direct consequence of the latter, as regards the whole of the sex. As women have none of the objects in life for which an enlarged education is considered requisite, the education is not given. Female education in America is much what it is in England. There is a profession of some things being taught which are supposed necessary because everybody learns them. They serve to fill up time, to occupy attention harmlessly, to improve conversation, and to make women something like companions to their husbands, and able to teach their children somewhat. But what is given is, for the most part, passively received; and what is obtained is, chiefly, by means of the memory. There is rarely or never a careful ordering of influences for the promotion of clear intellectual activity. Such activity, when it exceeds that which is necessary to make the work of the teacher easy, is feared and repressed. This is natural enough, as long as women are excluded from the objects
for which men are trained. While there are natural rights which women may not use, just
claims which are not to be listened to, large objects which may not be approached, even in
imagination, intellectual activity is dangerous: or, as the phrase is, unfit. Accordingly,
marriage is the only object left open to woman. Philosophy she may pursue only fancifully, and
under pain of ridicule: science only as a pastime, and under a similar penalty. Art is declared to be
left open: but the necessary learning, and, yet more, the indispensable experience of reality, are
denied to her. Literature is also said to be permitted: but under what penalties and restrictions?
Nothing is thus left for women but marriage.—Yes; Religion, is the reply.—Religion is a
temper, not a pursuit. It is the moral atmosphere in which human beings are to live and move.
Men do not live to breathe: they breathe to live.

The morals of women are crushed. If there be any human power and business and
privilege which is absolutely universal, it is the discovery and adoption of the principle and
laws of duty. As every individual, whether man or woman, has a reason and a conscience, this
is a work which each is thereby authorized to do for him or herself. But it is not only virtually
prohibited to beings who, like the American women, have scarcely any object in life proposed
to them; but the whole apparatus of opinion is brought to bear offensively upon individuals
among women who exercise freedom of mind in deciding upon what duty is, and the methods
by which it is to be pursued. There is nothing extraordinary to the disinterested observer in
women being so grieved at the case of slaves,—slave wives and mothers, as well as spirit-
broken men,—as to wish to do what they could for their relief: there is nothing but what is
natural in their being ashamed of the cowardice of such white slaves of the north as are
deterred by intimidation from using their rights of speech and of the press, in behalf of the
suffering race, and in their resolving not to do likewise: there is nothing but what is justifiable
in their using their moral freedom, each for herself, in neglect of the threats of punishment: yet
there were no bounds to the efforts made to crush the actions of woman who thus used their
human powers in the abolition question, and the convictions of those who looked on, and who
might possibly be warmed into free action by the beauty of what they saw. It will be
remembered that they were women who asserted the right of meeting and of discussion, on the
day when Garrison was mobbed in Boston. Bills were posed about the city on this occasion,
denouncing these women as casting off the refinement and delicacy of their sex: the
newspapers, which laud the exertions of ladies in all other charities for the prosecution of
which they are wont to meet and speak, teemed with the most disgusting reproaches and
insinuations: and the pamphlets which related to the question all presumed to censure the act
of duty which the women had performed in deciding upon their duty for themselves.—One
lady, of high talents and character, whose books were very popular before she did a deed
greater than that of writing any book, in acting upon an unusual conviction of duty, and
becoming an abolitionist, has been almost excommunicated since. A family of ladies, whose
talent and conscientiousness had placed them high in the estimation of society as teachers,
have lost all their pupils since they declared their anti-slavery opinions. The reproach in all the
many similar cases that I know is, not that the ladies hold anti-slavery opinions, but that they
act upon them.

How fearfully the morals of woman are crushed, appears from the prevalent persuasion
that there are virtues which are peculiarly masculine, and others which are peculiarly
feminine. It is not only that masculine and feminine employments are supposed to be properly
different. No one in the world, I believe, questions this. But it is actually supposed that what
are called the hardy virtues are more appropriate to men, and the gentler to women. As all
virtues nourish each other, and can no otherwise be nourished, the consequence of the admitted fallacy is that men are, after all, not nearly so brave as they ought to be; nor women so gentle. But what is the manly character till it be gently? The very word magnanimity cannot be thought of in relation to it till it becomes mild—Christ-like. Again, what can a woman be, or do, without bravery? While woman is human, men should beware how they deprive her of any of the strength which is all needed for the strife and burden of humanity. Let them beware how they put her off her watch and defence, by promises which they cannot fulfil;—promises of a guardianship which can arise only from within; of support which can be derived only from the freest moral action,—from the self-reliance which can be generated by no other means.

But, it may be asked, how does society get on,—what does it do? For it acts on the supposition of there being masculine and feminine virtues,—upon the fallacy just exposed.

It does so; and the consequences are what might be looked for. Men are ungentle, tyrannical. They abuse the right of the strongest, however they may veil the abuse with indulgence. They want the magnanimity to discern woman’s human rights; and they crush her morals rather than allow them. Women are, as might be anticipated, weak, ignorant and subservient, in as far as they exchange self-reliance for reliance on anything out of themselves. Those who will not submit to such a suspension of their moral functions, (for the work of self-perfection remains to be done, sooner or later,) have to suffer for their allegiance to duty. They have all the need of bravery that the few heroic men who assert the highest rights of women have of gentleness, to guard them from the encroachment to which power, custom, and education, incessantly conduce.

Such brave women and such just men there are in the United States, scattered among the multitude, whose false apprehension of rights leads to an enormous failure of duties. There are enough of such to commend the true understanding and practice to the simplest minds and most faithful hearts of the community, under whose testimony the right principle will spread and flourish. If it were not for the external prosperity of the country, the injured half of its society would probably obtain justice sooner than in any country of Europe. But the prosperity of America is a circumstance unfavourable to its women. It will be long before they are put to the proof as to what they are capable of thinking and doing: a proof to which hundreds, perhaps thousands of Englishwomen have been put by adversity, and the result of which is a remarkable improvement in their social condition, even within the space of ten years. Persecution for opinion, punishment for all manifestations of intellectual and moral strength, are still as common as women who have opinions and who manifest strength: but some things are easy, and many are possible of achievement, to women of ordinary powers, which it would have required genius to accomplish but a few years ago.