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Harriet Martineau (18-2-76) From *Society in America* (1837)

Harriet Martineau (1802-76) was a British author and activist who is often cited as the first female sociologist. Martineau began her career by publishing anonymously for the *Monthly Repository*, but after her family's textile business failed, she used her writing to support her family. Although Martineau originally published religious articles, she found fame by age thirty after publishing *Illustrations on Political Economy* (1832-34), a serialized work that sold more copies in the period than the work of Charles Dickens. After achieving financial security, Martineau travelled to the United States in September 1834 and spent two years touring the country and documenting her observations for what would become her most celebrated work of social criticism, *Society in America*. This was published in three volumes in London in 1837, just five years after the publication of Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. *Society in America* is Martineau's most comprehensive social criticism as her lengthy stay in the United States allowed her to see several regions, including New Orleans in the south and Chicago in the west. Martineau's popularity allowed her to move in prominent American social circles and to witness the political proceedings of the American government in Washington DC, which she documents in her travel narrative. While Martineau states in her introduction that she intends to relate her experiences to determine whether America upheld the ideals expressed in its Constitution and asserts that she has no desire to teach or judge Americans, she forcefully expresses her transatlantic perspective on the status of women

and the treatment of African Americans in the US. She went on to spend the remainder of her life working for the advancement of women and the anti-slavery campaign.

Citizenship of People of Colour (Volume I, Part I, Chapter III, Section VI)

Before I entered New England, while I was ascending the Mississippi, I was told by a Boston gentleman that the people of colour in the New England States were perfectly well-treated; that the children were educated in schools provided for them; and that their fathers freely exercised the franchise. This gentleman certainly believed he was telling me the truth. That he, a busy citizen of Boston, should know no better, is now as striking an exemplification of the state of the case to me as a correct representation of the facts would have been. There are two causes for his mistake. He was not aware that the schools for the coloured children in New England are, unless they escape by their insignificance, shut up, or pulled down, or the school-house wheeled away upon rollers over the frontier of a pious State, which will not endure that its coloured citizens should be educated. He was not aware of a gentleman of colour, and his family, being locked out of their own hired pew¹ in a church, because their white brethren will not worship by their side. But I will not proceed with an enumeration of injuries, too familiar to Americans to excite any feeling but that of weariness; and too disgusting to all others to be endured. The other cause of this gentleman's mistake was, that he did not, from long custom, feel some things to be injuries, which he would call anything but good treatment,

¹ It was commonplace for families to rent pews as a means of financial support for the church; the pew's location also signified a family's social status in the community.

if he had to bear them himself. Would he think it good treatment to be forbidden to eat with fellow-citizens; to be assigned to a particular gallery in his church; to be excluded from college, from municipal office, from professions, from scientific and literary associations? If he felt himself excluded from every department of society, but its humiliations and its drudgery, would he declare himself to be 'perfectly well-treated in Boston?' Not a word more of statement is needed.

A Connecticut judge lately declared on the bench that he believed people of colour were not considered citizens in the laws. He was proved to be wrong. He was actually ignorant of the wording of the acts by which people of colour are termed citizens. Of course, no judge could have forgotten this who had seen them treated as citizens: nor could one of the most eminent statesmen and lawyers in the country have told me that it is still a doubt, in the minds of some high authorities, whether people of colour are citizens. He is as mistaken as the judge. There has been no such doubt since the Connecticut judge was corrected and enlightened. The error of the statesman arose from the same cause; he had never seen the coloured people treated as citizens. 'In fact,' said he, 'these people hold an anomalous situation. They are protected as citizens when the public service requires their security; but not otherwise treated as such.' Any comment would weaken this intrepid statement.

The common argument, about the inferiority of the coloured race, bears no relation whatever to this question. They are citizens. They stand, as such, in the law, and in the acknowledgment of every one who knows the law. They are citizens, yet their houses and schools are pulled down, and they can obtain no remedy at law. They are thrust out of offices, and excluded from the most honourable employments, and stripped

of all the best benefits of society by fellow-citizens who, once a year², solemnly lay their hands on their hearts, and declare that all men are born free and equal, and that rulers derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.

This system of injury is not wearing out. Lafayette, on his last visit to the United States, expressed his astonishment at the increase of the prejudice against colour.³ He remembered, he said, how the black soldiers used to mess⁴ with the whites in the revolutionary war. The leaders of that war are gone where principles are all, – where prejudices are nothing. If their ghosts could arise, in majestic array, before the American nation, on their great anniversary, and hold up before them the mirror of their constitution, in the light of its first principles, where would the people hide themselves from the blasting radiance? They would call upon their holy soil to swallow them up, as unworthy to tread upon it. But not all. It should ever be remembered that America is the country of the best friends the coloured race has ever had. The more truth there is in the assertions of the oppressors of the blacks, the more heroism there is in their friends. The greater the excuse for the pharisees⁵ of the community, the more divine is the equity of the redeemers of the coloured race. If it be granted that the coloured race are naturally inferior, naturally depraved, disgusting, cursed, – it must be granted that it is a heavenly charity which descends among them to give such solace as it can to their

² Reference to the Fourth of July holiday in America.

³ Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roche Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834), fought beside Americans in the American Revolutionary War upon his first trip to the US and returned in 1784 at the invitation of George Washington.

⁴ To serve up (food); to divide and measure out (ingredients and portions) (*OED*). I.e., black and white soldiers ate together

⁵ A person of the spirit or character commonly attributed to the Pharisees in the New Testament; a legalist or formalist; a self-righteous person, a hypocrite (*OED*).

incomprehensible existence. As long as the excuses of the one party go to enhance the merit of the other, the society is not to be despaired of, even with this poisonous anomaly at its heart.

Happily, however, the coloured race is not cursed by God, as it is by some factions of his children. The less clear-sighted of them are pardonable for so believing. Circumstances, for which no living man is answerable, have generated an erroneous conviction in the feeble mind of man, which sees not beyond the actual and immediate. No remedy could ever have been applied, unless stronger minds than ordinary had been brought into the case. But it so happens, wherever there is an anomaly, giant minds rise up to overthrow it: minds gigantic, not in understanding, but in faith. Wherever they arise, they are the salt of their earth, and its corruption is retrieved. So it is now in America. While the mass of common men and women are despising, and disliking, and fearing, and keeping down the coloured race, blinking the fact that they are citizens, the few of Nature's aristocracy are putting forth a strong hand to lift up this degraded race out of oppression, and their country from the reproach of it. If they were but one or two, trembling and toiling in solitary energy, the world afar would be confident of their success. But they number hundreds and thousands; and if ever they feel a passing doubt of their progress, it is only because they are pressed upon by the meaner multitude. Over the sea, no one doubts of their victory. It is as certain as that the risen sun will reach the meridian. Already are there overflowing colleges, where no distinction of colour is allowed; – overflowing, *because* no distinction of colour is allowed. Already have people of colour crossed the thresholds of many whites, as guests, not as drudges or beggars. Already are they admitted to worship, and to exercise charity, among the whites.

The world has heard and seen enough of the reproach incurred by America, on account of her coloured population. It is now time to look for the fairer side. The crescent streak is brightening towards the full, to wane no more. Already is the world beyond the sea beginning to think of America, less as the country of the double-faced pretender to the name of Liberty, than as the home of the single-hearted, clear-eyed Presence which, under the name of Abolitionism, is majestically passing through the land which is soon to be her throne.

Political Non-Existence of Women (Volume I, Part I, Chapter III, Section VII)

One of the fundamental principles announced in the Declaration of Independence is, that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. How can the political condition of women be reconciled with this?

Governments in the United States have power to tax women who hold property; to divorce them from their husbands; to fine, imprison, and execute them for certain offences. Whence do these governments derive their powers? They are not 'just,' as they are not derived from the consent of the women thus governed.

Governments in the United States have power to enslave certain women; and also to punish other women for inhuman treatment of such slaves. Neither of these powers are 'just;' not being derived from the consent of the governed.

Governments decree to women in some States half their husbands' property; in others one-third. In some, a woman, on her marriage, is made to yield all her property to her husband; in others, to retain a portion, or the whole, in her own hands. Whence do

governments derive the unjust power of thus disposing of property without the consent of the governed?

The democratic principle condemns all this as wrong; and requires the equal political representation of all rational beings. Children, idiots, and criminals, during the season of sequestration, are the only fair exceptions.

The case is so plain that I might close it here; but it is interesting to inquire how so obvious a decision has been so evaded as to leave to women no political rights whatever. The question has been asked, from time to time, in more countries than one, how obedience to the laws can be required of women, when no woman has, either actually or virtually, given any assent to any law. No plausible answer has, as far as I can discover, been offered; for the good reason, that no plausible answer can be devised. The most principled democratic writers on government have on this subject sunk into fallacies, as disgraceful as any advocate of despotism has adduced. In fact, they have thus sunk from being, for the moment, advocates of despotism. Jefferson in America, and James Mill at home,⁶ subside, for the occasion, to the level of the author of the Emperor of Russia's Catechism for the young Poles.⁷

Jefferson says, 'Were our State a pure democracy, in which all the inhabitants should meet together to transact all their business, there would yet be excluded from their deliberations,

⁶ Martineau quotes an 1816 letter from Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) to Samuel Kercheval (1767-1845) and makes a connection between Jefferson's political views and those of James Mill (1773-1836), a British philosopher who published political essays and father of John Stuart Mill (1806-73).

⁷ After Poland fell under Russian domination, Polish cadets revolted against the Russian government in the 'Cadet Revolution of 1830,' but the Russian army of Tsar Nicholas I (1796-1855; r. 1825-55) annihilated them.

- '1. Infants, until arrived at years of discretion;
- '2. Women, who, to prevent depravation of morals, and ambiguity of issue, could not mix promiscuously in the public meetings of men;
- '3. Slaves, from whom the unfortunate state of things with us takes away the rights of will and of property.'

If the slave disqualification, here assigned, were shifted up under the head of Women, their case would be nearer the truth than as it now stands. Woman's lack of will and of property, is more like the true cause of her exclusion from the representation, than that which is actually set down against her. As if there could be no means of conducting public affairs but by promiscuous meetings! As if there would be more danger in promiscuous meetings for political business than in such meetings for worship, for oratory, for music, for dramatic entertainments, – for any of the thousand transactions of civilized life! The plea is not worth another word.

Mill says, with regard to representation, in his *Essay on Government*, 'One thing is pretty clear; that all those individuals, whose interests are involved in those of other individuals, may be struck off without inconvenience ... In this light, women may be regarded, the interest of almost all of whom is involved, either in that of their fathers or in that of their husbands.'⁸

The true democratic principle is, that no person's interests can be, or can be ascertained to be, identical with those of any other person. This allows the exclusion of none but incapables.

⁸ James Mill's 'Essay on Government' was written in 1820 for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

The word 'almost,' in Mr. Mill's second sentence, rescues women from the exclusion he proposes. As long as there are women who have neither husbands nor fathers, his proposition remains an absurdity.

The interests of women who have fathers and husbands can never be identical with theirs, while there is a necessity for laws to protect women against their husbands and fathers. This statement is not worth another word.

Some who desire that there should be an equality of property between men and women, oppose representation, on the ground that political duties would be incompatible with the other duties which women have to discharge. The reply to this is, that women are the best judges here. God has given time and power for the discharge of all duties; and, if he had not, it would be for women to decide which they would take, and which they would leave. But their guardians follow the ancient fashion of deciding what is best for their wards. The Emperor of Russia discovers when a coat of arms and title do not agree with a subject prince. The King of France early perceives that the air of Paris does not agree with a free-thinking foreigner. The English Tories feel the hardship that it would be to impose the franchise on every artizan, busy as he is in getting his bread. The Georgian planter perceives the hardship that freedom would be to his slaves. And the best friends of half the human race peremptorily decide for them as to their rights, their duties, their feelings, their powers. In all these cases, the persons thus cared for feel that the abstract decision rests with themselves; that, though they may be compelled to submit, they need not acquiesce.

It is pleaded that half of the human race does acquiesce in the decision of the other half, as to their rights and duties ... But this acquiescence is only partial; and, to

give any semblance of strength to the plea, the acquiescence must be complete. I, for one, do not acquiesce. I declare that whatever obedience I yield to the laws of the society in which I live is a matter between, not the community and myself; but my judgment and my will. Any punishment inflicted on me for the breach of the laws, I should regard as so much gratuitous injury; for to those laws I have never, actually or virtually, assented. I know that there are women in England who agree with me in this – I know that there are women in America who agree with me in this. The plea of acquiescence is invalidated by us.

It is pleaded that, by enjoying the protection of some laws, women give their assent to all. This needs but a brief answer. Any protection thus conferred is, under woman's circumstances, a boon⁹ bestowed at the pleasure of those in whose power she is. A boon of any sort is no compensation for the privation of something else; nor can the enjoyment of it bind to the performance of anything to which it bears no relation. Because I, by favour, may procure the imprisonment of the thief who robs my house, am I, unrepresented, therefore bound not to smuggle French ribbons? The obligation not to smuggle has a widely different derivation.

I cannot enter upon the commonest order of pleas of all; – those which relate to the virtual influence of woman; her swaying the judgment and will of man through the heart; and so forth. One might as well try to dissect the morning mist. I knew a gentleman in America who told me how much rather he had be a woman than the man he is; – a professional man, a father, a citizen. He would give up all this for a woman's influence. I thought he was mated too soon. He should have married a lady, also of any acquaintance,

⁹ A favour, a gift, a thing freely or graciously bestowed (*OED*).

who would not at all object to being a slave, if ever the blacks should have the upper hand; 'it is so right that the one race should be subservient to the other!' Or rather, – I thought it a pity that the one could not be a woman, and the other a slave; so that an injured individual of each class might be exalted into their places, to fulfil and enjoy the duties and privileges which they despise, and, in despising, disgrace ...

That woman has power to represent her own interests, no one can deny till she has been tried. The modes need not be discussed here: they must vary with circumstances. The fearful and absurd images which are perpetually called up to perplex the question, – images of women on wool-sacks¹⁰ in England, and under canopies¹¹ in America, have nothing to do with the matter. The principle being once established, the methods will follow, easily, naturally, and under a remarkable transmutation of the ludicrous into the sublime. The kings of Europe would have laughed mightily, two centuries ago, at the idea of a commoner, without robes, crown, or sceptre, stepping into the throne of a strong nation. Yet who dared to laugh when Washington's super-royal¹² voice greeted the New World from the presidential chair, and the old world stood still to catch the echo?

The principle of the equal rights of both halves of the human race is all we have to do with here. It is the true democratic principle which can never be seriously

¹⁰ A seat made of a bag of wool for the use of judges when summoned to attend the House of Lords; also, the usual seat of the Lord Chancellor in the House of Lords, made of a large square bag of wool without back or arms and covered with cloth. Often *allusively* with reference to the position of the Lord Chancellor as the highest judicial officer (*OED*).

¹¹ An architectural canopy was added over the bench of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court during the renovations of 1830.

¹² Above royal rank; higher than or beyond royal (*OED*).

controverted,¹³ and only for a short time evaded. Governments can derive their just powers only from the consent of the governed.

Source Text: Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837).

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¹³ Made the subject of controversy or debate; discussed, questioned, argued about (*OED*).