A TALE OF BAD TIMES; OR, ECOLOGICAL ECONOMY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HARRIET MARTINEAU

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One of the most vexing questions in today's conservation and economic policy debates is how to accommodate moral requirements for social and environmental justice within the ideologically narrow framework of the dominant economic paradigm, that of "*laissez faire*" utilitarian economics in all its guises. Many economists are now arguing that Adam Smith and the other classical economists have been taken out of their context and misinterpreted to justify, among other things, the corporate interest in the global, deregulated "level playing field." In particular the transdisciplinary discipline of ecological economics, which has a strong focus on the pluralist ideas of sustainable development, has been responsible for much of the lively debate about the misinterpretation of economic theory and its application to national and international policy. In order to attempt to place the development of "neo-classical" economic theory in its contemporary context, one needs to assess the ideas, lives and times of the classical economists themselves. One way of doing this is to examine the writings and beliefs of Harriet Martineau who acted as the popularising disseminator of much of their work. Martineau was an unashamed proponent of Smith's so-called *laissez faire* model of market economics at the same time as being a radical proponent of social justice and moral duty. While some analysts today see a paradox in this marriage of utilitarianism and morality, current dialogues of sustainable development and ecological economics demonstrate that this does not necessarily embody a contradiction.

Throughout the various roles and genres in which Martineau participated there is a consistency of thought that allows representation of a number of the conceptual themes on which she focused and which she continued to develop throughout her working life. Her first creditable idea as a political scientist and journalist, and one that drew on the work of others such as *Conversations on Political Economy* by Jane Marcet (Empson 1, 2), was to refine the use of language for the purpose of mass education. It was an idea that she pursued for the rest of her life and it led to some of her more original contributions to the contemporary knowledge base: social criticism and contextual landscape description, for example.

Martineau's scientific ideas were based on the science of the time, where the highly educated radical thinkers were polymaths who recognised in some way the interconnectedness of the biological and physical worlds with the social world of humans. Charles Darwin was a proponent of this integrated approach. He and his brother Erasmus were friends of Martineau, as were many other progressive thinkers of their day. There was a constant dialogue between those who would be known in modern times as scientists and social scientists. Scientists exchanged scientific ideas, and the political economists, whose work Martineau set about interpreting for the public, were perhaps the most prominent scientists of their day. While their language may have been

opaque to the uneducated, it did not have the narrow exclusivity of some of the specialised disciplines of today. It is almost as if Martineau, foreseeing the potential for the power of knowledge to be further concentrated in the hands of the few, sought to prevent it. She attempted to interpret and disseminate the new ideas and knowledge as widely as possible, for the ordinary people "would be unable to appreciate and understand the serious and erudite expositions of the scientists" (Wheatley 78).

In her own time Martineau's most controversial work, and the one for which she was vilified as a woman, was her interpretation of the ideas of Thomas Malthus. Malthusian economics were what her friend the philosopher Thomas Carlyle referred to as "the dismal science." There seems to be little doubt that, as well as acting as "instructor to the nation" in interpreting and disseminating the ideas of contemporary thinkers, Martineau also believed in the Malthusian theories of population. These accorded with her notion that women should have control of their own fertility and their own destiny. She too believed that the better world that would result from the application of Smith's theories to industry would help to ameliorate poverty, and that the thousands of children, who would otherwise fail to survive to adulthood, would have the chance to reproduce themselves. This would lead to overpopulation and another cycle of social hardship as the world's resources struggled to keep pace.

As well as her instructional writings, Martineau shared her lived experiences with her readership. She did this particularly with her writings on the foreign lands she visited. She produced original ideas through social criticism as she meticulously recorded her observations and analyses of other landscapes and other cultures—of the spaces and places that were not her own. Her work on the abolition of slavery, her repugnance for the subjugation of women, her thoughts on democratic process, and her ideas about religion made significant contributions to the accumulation of knowledge, and demonstrated her commitment to social justice. Her writing gives context and texture to our current debates on feminism, equity, sustainable development, cultural imperialism and the emerging debate on the possibility of a new economic paradigm which incorporates ethical considerations. Current generations of "radical thinkers" suggest that such a paradigm could meet social and environmental justice objectives through the marriage of utilitarianism and moral duty. One writer states of Martineau:

> Her uninterrupted devotional and critical study of the Bible is imaginatively projected first in *Traditions of Palestine* (1830), stories of contemporaries of Christ in imagined biblical landscapes, and reaches a climax in *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848), which describes her travels in the lands of the Bible. The *Autobiography* identifies the revelatory moment on these travels which forced her into apostasy; *Eastern Life* read with the *Autobiography* in mind reveals the experience to be one where, in the Wordsworthian mode, landscape and revelation are inseparable. (Hunter 5)

Many of today's scientists and social scientists who are grappling with the almost intractable problems of human-induced climate change, ecosystem destruction,

emergent diseases, human poverty and social injustice would agree. Even stripped of their allusions to poetry and religion, we can learn *that* much from the writings of Harriet Martineau. Landscape and revelation *are* inseparable, for in today's context, for example, the visually graphic degradation of landscapes from over-logging and over-cropping, and the emergence of new, potentially fatal diseases, reveals to us the fragility and dependence of human existence on a balanced environment.

Martineau has had an enduring influence, both directly and indirectly, across a wide range of disciplines. Some of her influence is due to her action as a conduit for the ideas of others. This is particularly true of her writings for *Illustrations of Political Economy*. But even when acting as a conduit she was working to spread her own ideas. Whatever the focus of her work, she saw her foremost role as an educator: as a person who could bring about benevolent social change through sharing the power of knowledge. In this she was manifestly successful and, rarely for a woman of her time, this success also brought her financial security and the intellectual freedom to pursue her own ideas. Martineau believed in the emancipation of women, and in the emancipation of slaves; she believed in altruism and attention to moral duty; and she believed in education and the amelioration of poverty and injustice. Unlike some of her friends and associates, she also believed in the science of political economy in its utilitarian guise. That she saw all these elements as linked is perhaps beyond dispute and clearly she saw no paradox in supporting both altruism and selective utilitarianism.

Martineau was one of many Victorians who addressed social injustice and gender inequality by participating as an intellectual woman in a socially discriminatory, male-dominated world. In this context it is not possible to quantify the impact of her activities as an individual, or those of others like her. However, her activities, her influence and her ideas would most certainly have made a significant contribution to a collective influence on the slow acceptance of women into science; on the provision of public education for society at large; on the recognition of women as the intellectual equals of men; on the appreciation of cultural difference; on the study of landscape and history in the socio-cultural context; and on the acceptance of illustrative didactism as a means of disseminating complex ideas. In addition, because of the honesty, comprehensiveness and detail of her writings, she provides an historical context in which to understand and correct current misconceptions about the beliefs and intentions of the "radical thinkers" whose work she disseminated for the uneducated.

Today this is a particularly valuable legacy. Much of the work of Adam Smith and other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political economists has been used to justify extreme, fundamentalist forms of economic policy such as "economic rationalism." This has been used to promote the "deregulation" of national and global markets, and to justify environmental destruction and social inequity on the grounds that only the market can allocate (all) resources efficiently. In the most extreme cases ethics, particularly those relating to inter- and intra-generational equity, are argued to be superfluous. As mentioned earlier this is cogent in the context of sustainable development which, according to the World Commission on Environment and Development, is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 8).

While the term "sustainable development" was utterly unknown to Martineau, one does not have to look far to discover that she would have supported it. Notions of conservation, recycling and sustaining are threaded through her work. One of her later books, *Health, Husbandry and Handicraft* (1861), might be read by some as resembling a new-millennium, alternative-lifestyle manual. Martineau's intended application of utilitarianism apparently was narrow. It was never meant to be a call for adherence to the philosophy of selfishness, nor for present generations to preclude consideration of future generations.

Interpretation of the concept of sustainable development has over the years subsequent to the WCED report become more and more controversial, with many governments applying it in the context of economic growth within a narrow utilitarian framework commonly attributed to Adam Smith. However, while some interpretations of sustainable development place it within a commercial economics context, the growing dialogue of dissent asserts that it should be predicated on an ethical or moral basis with which, her utilitarian credentials notwithstanding, Martineau would surely have agreed. Perhaps at this stage it is worth reconsidering Smith's views. Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was a revolutionary book. As Heilbroner notes, this was because "wealth . . . consists of the goods which all people in society consume; note *all* - this is a democratic, and hence radical, philosophy of wealth" (51).

There is no doubt that Martineau supported Smith's view of utilitarianism, though other great thinkers, such as Martineau's friend Thomas Carlyle, did not. She, like Smith, believed that when applied to the miserable factories and workshops of industrial Britain it might break the monopolistic power of the merchant classes and enable the redistribution of wealth to the whole nation. However, both Smith and Martineau also believed in increasing government subsidies and government intervention in some non-industrial areas of society. For Martineau these included subsidies for public education and the regulation of health and housing in an attempt to disrupt the *market* stranglehold of private landlords in the disease-ridden tenements and slums of the underpaid and exploited working class. Both Smith and Martineau, and most of their fellow intellectuals, also believed in the strength of moral duty. Smith in his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* pondered (as well a utilitarian might) the question of how people formulate moral judgments that result in altruistic behaviour which transcends self-interest.

Around the turn of the nineteenth century concern was expressed by many intellectuals that the new science of political economy would turn moral values into a "cost calculus." William Wordsworth and Carlyle, both friends of Martineau, were scathing in this respect. But Smith, Malthus and John Stuart Mill were all at great pains to conserve "moral sentiments" and higher human values in the context of their narrowly based proposals for utilitarian economics:

> While Malthus, in particular, endorses the idea popularised by Smith of the alleged global benefits of the pursuit of self-interest, he systematically adds the reservation that an individual should so act only 'while he adheres to the rules of justice' (1820: 3, 518).

> Furthermore, Smith, Ricardo, Malthus and Marx adopt and sustain Aristotle's distinction between 'use value' and 'exchange value', seeing the former as the irreducible, objective qualities of goods and services in providing for human and social needs. Despite clear utilitarian traits in all their works, these classical economists are reluctant to pursue the logic of subjectivism to its limit and establish a single measure of worth based on subjective utility. (Hodgson 53)

In Harriet Martineau's work, and in that of other Victorians since, altruism was almost a paradigm for them, the theme of moral duty recurs. It sits in parallel with utilitarianism which appears to have its own strict and narrow context that does not transgress the boundaries of the realm of moral duty. According to Deidre David "duty is a keyword in Martineau's text, an abstraction and practice directing her life and work" (87), and furthermore, she was "unauthorised by the need to popularise abstract theory or the moral duty to publicise injustice" (88).

Martineau, perhaps influenced by Comte and Wordsworth, interwove landscape and revelation, fused "imagery of natural and human growth:

> She constructs a vision of the human mind taking root in the fertile soil of the Valley of the Nile, learning from its Egyptian nurse, repelling entangling weeds of barbarism and ignorance, and finally blossoming forth into Christianity. The entire process is fed by an 'idea'—a spirit, a law, a principle—at work throughout all historical time . . . this idea remains largely undefined . . . as something approximating moral good being the highest good and moral evil being the deepest evil. (David 72)

For Smith, a Glasgow lecturer in moral philosophy, much of his work was driven by concern for the sordid human condition since "no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which by far the greater part of the numbers are poor and miserable" (qtd Heilbroner 59). Further, "it is not uncommon . . . in the Highlands of Scotland for a mother who has borne twenty children not to have two alive" (qtd Heilbroner 63).

When Martineau began publishing *Illustrations of Political Economy* Smith's work was neither well known nor popular. Part of her enduring influence was in the popularisation of this work, though neither Smith nor Martineau could have envisaged that more than two hundred years after Smith's death in 1790 it could be interpreted and applied in a manner apparently so contrary to Smith's goals for society. That market economics, applied so far outside its intended target of local industry and its owners the merchant class, could be deemed by some in the late-twentieth century, and into the next millennium, to have removed the need for ethical criteria in decision making *is* something of a paradox. Neither Smith nor Martineau could have foreseen the multinational power of global corporations; nor the destruction of natural environments in the name of economics; nor the dismantling of educational, health and welfare systems in accord with "market principles."

A contemporary reviewer of Martineau's *Illustrations* firmly gives her the credit for promoting Smith's economic principles:

> But she has already made, by a previously undreamed of route, a brilliant progress towards the rescue of her beloved science—the science of Adam Smith—from the cloud under which some persons have thought was gathering over its condition and its fate. There are practical men who delighted to spread the rumour that it had died outright in the cavern of its obscure abstractions. (Empson 2)

The strongest contemporary criticism of Martineau was reserved for her as a woman meddling in science. Even Empson, who compared her favourably with Marcet while reviewing both their works in the one article and was generally laudatory about her, quibbled on this point. At that time many intellectual women were challenging the view that woman was inferior to man, particularly with regard to science. One, who had conducted her own research into the comparative scientific abilities of academic men and women (working with an understandably small sample), saw the subjugation of the intellectual resources of half the population as a great loss to humanity. She concluded that:

> The cry for equal rights for all human beings proceeds from the irrepressible consciousness of equal needs, and the possession of common feelings. The movement now hourly gaining strength for the social, educational, and political enfranchisement of women, arise from no spirit of opposition or rivalry with men, but from deep and intense sympathy in their noblest aims and aspirations. (Becker 404)

This view is partly mirrored in the writings of an ecofeminist almost a century and a half later:

> The ecofeminist case for linking the experience of women with ecological sustainability does not rest on women's essential and universal identity with 'nature' either as biology or ecology. Rather it rests on women's material reality and the pivotal position they play in mediating the relationship between male-dominated economic and social systems and the embodiedness and embeddedness of human societies. (Mellor 67)

The era in which Martineau lived was a time of massive intellectual change; of progress in science, literature and humanitarianism. It represented a transition between the past and the future. While Martineau was agitating, educating, criticising, acting and analysing, her very close contemporaries such as Darwin and Mill, who were born within four years of her and each other, who also wrote an *Autobiography* apiece, and whose lifespans were remarkably similar, were spreading ideas of their own. Darwin,

who in his turn was influenced by Malthus and who expressed a nascent view of the biocentrism that requires a moral framework for sustainable development, reflected:

> If beautiful objects had been created solely for man's gratification, it ought to be shown that there was less beauty on the face of the earth than since he came on stage. Were the beautiful volute and cone shells of the Eocene epoch, and the gracefully sculptured ammonites of the secondary period, created that man might admire them in his cabinet?" (251)

At the end of the second volume of her *Autobiography*, when she was writing on what she believed to be her deathbed, Martineau, who prevented publication of the book until after her death, had her final say. It is almost as if she was aware of the language in which progressive concepts of sustainable development are expressed today. She made clear links between morality, concern for future generations, the welfare of the human race, and the destructive influence of institutionalised selfishness, when she wrote:

> With the last of the mythologies will pass away, after some lingering, the immoralities which have attended all mythologies. Now, while the state of our race is such as to need all our mutual devotedness, all our aspiration, all our resources of courage, hope, faith and good cheer, the disciples of the Christian creed and morality are called upon, day by day, to 'work out *their own* salvation with fear and trembling', and so forth. Such exhortations are too low for even the wavering mood and cracked morality of a time of theological suspense and uncertainty. In the extinction of that suspense, and the discrediting of that [*selfish quackery*], I see the prospect, for [*future generations*], of a purer and loftier virtue, and a truer and sweeter heroism than divines who preach such [*self-seeking*] can conceive of. When our race is trained in [*the morality*] which belongs to ascertained truth, all the 'fear and trembling' will be left to children; and men will have risen to a capacity for higher work than saving themselves,--to that of 'working out' the welfare of their race, not in 'fear and trembling', but with serene hope and joyful assurance. (461)

It is a supreme irony that a narrow interpretation and broad-scale application of utilitarian economics—the economics of selfishness--has replaced the mythology of religion to which Harriet Martineau so disparagingly referred. Over a century after her death some now see the mythology of economics as embodying the "selfish quackery" that will damage the "welfare of their race" including that of future generations.

Nearly all of the "radical thinkers" of Martineau's era were humanitarians. Smith, Ricardo, Malthus and Mill—the great Political Economists—were motivated by their desire to improve the condition of society as a whole. They exchanged ideas with other thinkers, refined their thoughts, argued, and proposed their principles in different

ways. Mill, for example, was more "socialist" than Smith: He felt that taxes and subsidies, expropriation and redistribution were the better vehicles for social improvement—that society could "change what it did not like." Their disagreements notwithstanding, they influenced each other, and perhaps Martineau's greatest influence as conduit, social critic and activist was to disseminate the new knowledge widely, to show herself as a woman intellectual, and to strengthen the society she wished to help by endowing it with knowledge. She spread ideas, her own and those of others, across her nation, and she wrote prodigiously. Her meticulous records of the ideas and culture of her era embedded the notions of the "radical thinkers" in their own context, and pulled together the disparate threads of science, feminism, education, nature and humanitarianism into a common, interwoven cloth. In our own "Bad Times" we can use her contributions, whatever we feel about her beliefs, to reinterpret and reconnect our economic paradigm to its ethical parallel, within the modern concept of sustainable development.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Judy Johnston who introduced me to Harriet Martineau and her work, and who generously shared her books and papers with me.

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