Harriet Martineau, John H. Bridges, and the sociological imagination

Matthew WILSON
Ball State University
Email: MRWilson@BSU.edu
ORCID: 0000-0003-0406-1743

Abstract
For first-generation sociologists Harriet Martineau and John H. Bridges, intelligence and creativity kindled the sociological imagination, revealing the links between personal troubles and social issues. A social analyst, novelist, and reformer, Martineau published the first sociological studies in Britain from a feminist-intellectual perspective. She also translated and condensed Auguste Comte’s *Cours de philosophie positivisme* (1830–42), which introduced the modern discipline of sociology. Here, Comte presented sociology as a modern master-science of society and the centre of all future knowledge. Bridges, meanwhile, translated part of Comte’s magnum opus, *Système de politique positive* (1851–4). This study set the bar for calling oneself a sociologist at: obtaining a medical license, adhering to Comte’s new ‘Religion of Humanity’, and seeking to realise his utopian vision of modernity. On this basis, Bridges not only developed a biologic-historical outlook of sociology but worked as a physician, Poor Law inspector, political activist, and philosopher. This essay explores these sociologists’ complementary methods for interpreting Victorian life through the lens of Comtean Positivism. It will be shown that their works were imbued with altruistic and utopian sentiments seeking to transform thoughts and feelings into actions via didactic instruction. Their distinct utopian hopes and beliefs, it will be argued, played a role in the institutionalisation of the discipline of sociology in Britain.

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