Rethinking Disability and Classical Social Theory
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Historiographical work has sought to broaden and reconstruct our understanding of classical social theory, especially by recovering authors and perspectives that have traditionally been excluded – especially around issues of race, gender, and coloniality. The present study follows in that direction by reconsidering the issue of disability/ability. The 'canon' of classical social theory as it is typically taught and discussed routinely ignores this topic. Some canonical authors, especially Marx (and to a certain extent Georg Simmel, G. H. Mead, and others) have informed later social-theoretical approaches to disability. But in addition, this project gathers together works by authors outside this canon writing in the same nineteenth- and early-twentieth century period that explicitly center the theorizing of disability from a primarily social rather than pathological perspective. In particular, the project highlights contributions from Harriet Martineau, a set of French and American Deaf educationalists (Thérèse-Adèle Husson, Roch-Amboise Bebian, Pierre Desloges, Henri Gaillard, John Flournoy), Annie Marion MacLean, Randolph Bourne, and Helen Keller. I show how the leads from revisionist historiographical scholarship (e.g., the work of Mary Jo Deegan and Harlan Lane) can help us recover the unique insights of these authors and can enrich the body of classical social theory. This is part of a larger project that expands on my previous SSHA contributions on "Helen Keller as a Social Theorist."