

JHET INTERVIEWS: EVELYN FORGET

BY
VIRGINIE GOUVERNEUR

A WOMAN OF VALUE

Evelyn Forget is among the “women of value” working in the economics profession. Her work has always been on the interface between theory and policy. It focuses on how economic tools and language can be mobilized to ensure that all members of society have access to the resources and services that allow us to live with dignity. Her contributions on the issue fall into two areas: history of economics, and health and social policy research. Her work in the latter area has earned her the titles of Officer of the Order of Canada and Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. Her most recent research focuses on the issue of basic income, which in Canada really means a form of targeted guaranteed income. Her 2018 book *Basic Income for Canadians* was shortlisted for the 2018–19 Donner Prize. In 2020, she updated the book to focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her latest book, *Radical Trust: Basic Income for Complicated Lives*, co-written with Hannah Owczar, was published in 2021.

Evelyn Forget is also very active in the field of the history and philosophy of economics. She has received many research grants and prizes. She has written numerous articles published in refereed journals, as well as articles and chapters that are parts of books. Her work focuses on various aspects of the thought of economists who lived between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in particular (Adam Smith, Jean-Baptiste Say, Sophie de Condorcet, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor, John Maynard Keynes, to name a few). Her first book was *The Social Economics of Jean-Baptiste Say: Markets and Virtue* (1999). She then has edited or co-edited seven books in the field of the history and philosophy of economics. Throughout her career, she has been an advocate of diversity, and her scholarly work has helped make visible women economists who were particularly concerned with the issue that drives her own works. She has co-edited, with Mary Ann Dimand and Robert William Dimand, *Women of Value: Feminist Essays on the History of Women in Economics* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1995), in which she raised the question: “American Women Economists, 1912–1932: A Marginal Era?” She is particularly committed to highlighting the contribution of Margaret Gilpin Reid (1896–1991) to the development of economic thought in the area of household production, housework, and non-market activities.

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Evelyn Forget is an active member of various scholarly societies. Among these is the History of Economics Society (HES). She served on the editorial board of the society's journal, *Journal of the History of Economic Thought (JHET)*, from 1999 to 2008. She became co-editor from 2008 to 2013. She served as a member of the executive committee of the HES in 2005 and as vice-president of the HES from 2007 to 2008. Then she served as president of the HES from 2017 to 2019.

Gouverneur: So let's start at the beginning! What led you to study economics, which you started at York University (Toronto) in 1978? And then (if it happened later), what led you to the history of economic thought?

Forget: When I was an undergraduate at Glendon College in Toronto, I was attracted to economics because of its policy stance. Remember, this was the 1970s, and many of us turned to economics because we believed that economics was a tool set that could make people's lives better. I actually began my university career as a psychology major but I accidentally found myself in an economics class because the university had a "distribution" requirement—that is, I needed to take another social science course. I wasn't looking forward to it. In fact, I approached it with a bit of dread. One day, early in the term, my professor came to class and told us about this great social experiment that was taking place "way out west somewhere." It would, he said, revolutionize the way we delivered social programs in Canada. It was the Mincome experiment, which was one of the five guaranteed annual income experiments that took place during the 1970s. The other four took place in the US. I was mesmerized by the thought of a social experiment on such a scale and I was intrigued by the idea of poverty mitigation that might be more efficient and effective than existing welfare programs. So, I switched my major, and I loved economics as an undergrad. But, as happens, graduate training in economics didn't have much to do with policy in 1979. I was bored to tears. But there was a requirement to take a HET [history of economic thought] or economic history course. I took HET and Sam Hollander was professor. I read [Adam] Smith, and [David] Ricardo and [John Stuart] Mill, and, of course, they were writing about interesting things in the real world, unlike all the material I was reading in my other classes.

Gouverneur: Were you supported in this choice of specialization (by professors, relatives, or others), or on the contrary did you have to impose it in the face of warnings against the difficulties associated with this field of research (job search, etc.)?

Forget: I don't come from a university family. My family tried really hard to encourage me to go to community college to become a legal secretary. Trust me: the world is better off that I didn't become a legal secretary. And certainly some poor lawyer is much better off. So, there was no family pressure. They thought university was a waste of time, so they wouldn't spend time quibbling about fields of study. As an undergrad, I had a professor who tried to encourage me to transfer to engineering for reasons I can't begin to imagine.

I did have one extraordinary undergraduate professor: Ian McDonald at Glendon College. He encouraged me to write about all kinds of things. I remember writing a paper for him on [Piero] Sraffa's *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*, which was sort of a hot topic at the time. It led me to Ricardo and the classics, and he encouraged me to keep reading and steered me to the University of Toronto and Sam Hollander.

I didn't expect to become a professor. I figured that one day I'd graduate and then I'd have to get some kind of job, but as long as I kept getting scholarships I just kept doing what I wanted to do.

Gouverneur: You completed your MA in political economy (1979) and your PhD in economics (1986) at the University of Toronto. Moreover, between 1985 and 1989, you were an assistant professor in the Department of Economics of the University of Winnipeg. What were these universities like then (courses, gender parity—among professors, students, atmosphere, etc.)?

Forget: For a little while, I was the only female student in the PhD program. Most women took an MA and left because there were pretty good jobs for someone with an MA. The University of Toronto had a lot of students begin the PhD program, but attrition was pretty high. It was going through a bit of a transformation at the time. There were a few good professors who held on to students. Frankly, I felt a bit like an outsider, but that was my issue. I had a baby early in my doctoral training, and she was born with a major birth defect and a few other health issues. I was also living quite a way outside Toronto at the time, so the commute was difficult, especially in winter. We don't have the kind of rail links that exist in Europe, so there was a lot of highway driving in snowstorms. I didn't really have much to do with the university, beyond meeting requirements and writing my thesis.

The University of Winnipeg was my first full-time job, and it was almost entirely an undergraduate university so the teaching load was quite high. It was an urban university, with a lot of students who faced challenges in their lives. I think I would enjoy that now, but it was hard as a junior faculty member to try to publish and to deal with the teaching at the same time. I was happy to be recruited by the University of Manitoba, which had a graduate program and a lighter teaching load.

Gouverneur: Samuel Hollander supervised your thesis work, just like that of Margaret Schabas (who was his first doctoral student) and of Sandra Peart afterwards. How do you feel about your years of thesis under his supervision?

Forget: Sam Hollander is a unique person, as are we all. I learned a lot working under his supervision. He was very dedicated to his research and he persevered despite some pretty crushing criticism from some quarters. That single-minded focus is something I've always envied and never been able to achieve.

Gouverneur: What were your first loves or favorites (themes, economists, etc.) in the field of the history and philosophy of economics, and why? Can you tell us a bit about your thesis work and how it impacted your interests, methods, and research activities in the history of economic thought?

Forget: I'm not sure my thesis had much to do with what I chose to do subsequently. It was a really hard time in my life. I'm happy I was able to finish it, and I'm grateful that Sam Hollander supported me in that, but I wasn't pleased with what I accomplished. That was just a consequence of events in my personal life. I lacked confidence and I was being pulled in many different directions by my personal issues.

I was very attracted to the classics and, especially, to John Stuart Mill. I liked the idea of losing myself in a different world. I think the kind of work I do in HET has changed a lot from the kind of work I did then.

Gouverneur: How would you define your relationship (same generation, similar difficulties, commonalities in career or research themes, personal affinities, etc.) with Margaret Schabas and Sandra Peart, whom you met during your studies in Toronto and with whom you later collaborated as a researcher?

Forget: I admire them both tremendously. I think the three of us are very different people with different interests and strengths. I think we all struggle a bit with self-confidence, although that struggle shows up in different ways. But so do almost all academics; it is an ego-destroying enterprise. We weren't actually there at the same time in the same cohort. Sandy was a couple of years younger, and Margaret was in a different department—the history and philosophy of science.

Gouverneur: Throughout your career as a historian of economic thought, you have largely contributed to make women economists visible. Have you yourself been inspired (or even influenced or mentored) by a woman (women) economist(s) at any point of your career?

Forget: I think Mary Morgan and Margaret Schabas have helped me, often without my being aware of it. I didn't know many women economists. Susan Howson was on the faculty at Toronto, but I didn't really know her. I wasn't the sort of student who knew you were supposed to network with professors, so I didn't try very hard. I subsequently wrote about some women, but I didn't know them. This will sound odd to you because it was the 1980s, but I really didn't think much about gender. I just assumed that I would face whatever opportunities and challenges confronted my male colleagues.

It was an odd time. My life was so dramatically different from my mother's life and the lives of my non-university acquaintances. None of the girls I went to high school with went on to university. Just recently, I reconnected with a couple of girlfriends from high school and, my goodness, their lives and mine have really diverged in so many ways. It is like we lived in different centuries, and I've been the lucky one. But, somehow, I didn't reflect at all on what that might have meant for my own life at the time. I thought my choices and opportunities were just exactly the same as those of male students of my generation. Although, in retrospect, I doubt that many of them were pregnant while they were writing candidacy exams. Or read Mill to their infants to put them to sleep. (It worked really well, by the way.)

Gouverneur: Do you think that you have encountered particular difficulties as a woman in this field of research (reconciliation of professional and personal life, visibility and recognition of women economists, access to awards/funding/positions of responsibility, etc.)? Have you seen an evolution in these areas or some of them? What progress do you think remains to be made (and in which areas)?

Forget: Everyone runs into barriers and difficulties, and it's hard to know what they are and why they exist. Everyone makes decisions and of course their choices are influenced, but not forced, by their circumstances. For most of my career, I think I have struggled a bit with visibility, but that's due to my personality as much as my gender. I am very much an introvert. I have always been lucky in terms of funding, both as a student and as a researcher. I've spent most of my life trying to avoid positions of responsibility, not always with success. I don't really seek those positions, so I don't feel bad if I'm overlooked. In fact, I usually sigh with relief.

I think, frankly, I faced more difficulties because of class than gender. I married young and had a baby young. I didn't have many role models in my personal life or context. I made a lot of bad decisions, sometimes because I didn't know what decisions were open to me. At the same time, I've had a lot of support from some senior historians of economics. Craufurd Goodwin was very nice and very supportive. Roy Weintraub, despite his reputation, was extraordinarily kind to me.

That's not to say there is no gender discrimination. Of course there is. I can say I didn't seek positions of responsibility, but, if I had, would they have been available? Could I have been mentored if I sought a mentor? I don't know. I've certainly seen some clear gender discrimination when I served on promotion and grants committees. Example: "Her research has really slowed down the last couple of years." "Yes, did you notice she had triplets?" "Well, two years ago." "Triplets." Believe it or not, I really had this conversation.

I think women rarely get the benefit of the doubt, even now. I've been in lots of meetings when someone says, "Give him the money. He's so smart. He's just brilliant." And yet, there's little on his CV to justify that comment. I've never been in a meeting when someone says, "Give her the money. She's brilliant." They are more likely to say, and I've heard this, "There's an awful lot of stuff on her CV. Will she have time to take this on?" Women may be praised as hard workers but not very often as brilliant scholars. (Frankly, I'm guilty of this, too. I see so many of my female students working so hard, it's difficult not to mention it in letters of reference. But praising a woman for being a hard worker is a sort of backhanded compliment, because I've come to understand that many people read it as "works hard, but doesn't have the chops.") Similarly, women don't get many second chances. Right now, there are lots of opportunities for women to take positions and show their stuff, but if they fail there won't be another chance. I've seen lots of women fall hard.

There has, of course, been extraordinary progress. I do a lot of thesis examination, both in HET and in social policy, all over the world. The majority of the students I examine are women. They are wonderful, competent, self-confident scholars, and their mentors have been very supportive. I think we're also trying to convince them not to work themselves into an early grave, just to prove they deserve a chance. I'm happy that universities and journals are being forced to diversify, because I think that does give women opportunities to show what they can do. But we need to question the culture of academia and not just admit women to it. We need to be smarter about how hard to work, and how to ensure we have a life outside the academy. There needs to be space for families and friends. And failure. There needs to be space for people to try and to fail but to get up and try again. I don't think our culture allows that.

I think we also have to recognize that the biggest beneficiaries of "diversity, equity, inclusion" initiatives have been middle-class White women. Change is always difficult. It was uncomfortable in the 1970s and it is still uncomfortable. I seem to be benefitting from the current changes, but I'm not sure I feel better about being privileged than I did about being oppressed. It's just life.

Gouverneur: The first time you published on Margaret Reid was in 1996 ["Margaret Gilpin Reid: A Manitoba Home Economist Goes to Chicago," *Feminist Economics* 2 (3): 1–16]. Several other works followed, the last of which dates from 2022. Why did you choose to take an interest in the work of Margaret Reid in particular?

Forget: She is an extraordinary woman writing at the nexus of a lot of issues that interest me. I was asked to write that first piece—and most of the subsequent pieces, for that matter. She was, of course, in Chicago doing “income” with [Milton] Friedman and [Franco] Modigliani, but she spent her retirement years writing about income and health. She was influenced by the war on poverty, in the same way that almost all women social scientists of her generation were.

She was also personally interesting. She was born in Manitoba and got an undergraduate degree from my university at a time when “economics” consisted of one professor with an MA in theology and one “assistant”—a woman with a PhD (Reid’s degree was in home economics). She was also someone who leapt up and took advantage of opportunities she never expected to receive. The Manitoba government, like state governments at the time, were trying to create a cohort of home economists to teach in the school system. This was seen as necessary to integrate the very large Eastern European immigrant population, who were a bit of a threat to the rather staid Scottish population in place. She was born on a homestead and teaching at a rural school; she seized the opportunity to go to college, which was hardly an expectation for women like her. And she ended up at Chicago working with Friedman. Pretty cool, no?

Gouverneur: In 2000, you began working on health economics and social policy. Does this bring you anything in the field of the history and philosophy of economics? Vice versa, has your background in history of economic thought helped you in some way in health economics? If so, how? In asking these questions, I am thinking in particular of two of your articles: “Why Should a Professional Economist Study the History of Economic Thought?” [1997, *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Method* 15: 199–207]; and “Contested Histories of an Applied Field: The Case of Health Economics” [2004, *History of Political Economy* 36 (4): 617–637].

Forget: Well, one of the benefits of being an economist working outside an economics department is that you can spout a cliché from first-year economics and everyone thinks you’re brilliant. If you do HET, even the economists won’t necessarily recognize the source of your insight. I’ve gotten lots of credit for permanent income.

Seriously, though, working across disciplines is much more interesting than working within a discipline—at least to me. I always have something new to learn. It’s really very cool to shadow someone from a level-one lab and have them explain to you exactly how they can tell you when a strain of infection appeared and who might have infected whom. I’ve been working recently with a group doing HIV research in Ukraine. Obviously, that’s pretty much on hold right now, but we were working with female sex workers, doing interviews and triangulating all kinds of empirical data. We have a huge interdisciplinary team and it’s fascinating to see the insights that different people bring to the work. What, exactly, does economic empowerment mean to a fourteen-year-old who, occasionally, trades sex for gifts? The answer is very different for an economist, a social worker, an epidemiologist, and an anthropologist.

I spend a lot of my time translating between the jargon that different academics and clinicians use. I think HET is really good training for that, because much of what we do is trying to understand the similarities and differences between people who use different language. I was actually hired into my department because they wanted to hire an economist, but they couldn’t find one they could talk to.

As a historian, I think I've gained in two ways. First, if you do policy research, you recognize that the stakes are entirely different from what they are in theory. You are always making decisions in the moment and trading off precision for comprehensibility, thoroughness for timeliness, and so on. If you have a visceral understanding of that, you bring a different mindset to different kinds of writing. Going back to Mill, for example, a great deal of what he wrote was policy research. I understand, in a way I didn't before, why he wrote some things the way he wrote them. Second, I think you recognize that history is not just a story about the past. It's a source of theory and inspiration. Policy doesn't "progress" the same way that theory does; the policy issues Mill dealt with are still very much alive, albeit sometimes in different dress. That makes the history more interesting—to me, at least—and it makes the policy reports you write better.

Gouverneur: Your first presentation of research work at the HES annual conferences was in June 1987, wasn't it? What was your impression then?

Forget: I remember it as a comfortable conference. Economists are sometimes quite aggressive. They were, even in my department, very aggressive. But at the HES, no one yelled or banged on the table. People talked to me. I felt comfortable. I wasn't afraid to participate.

Gouverneur: You subsequently presented numerous papers at HES conferences and published several articles in the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought (JHET)*. In 1999, you became a member of the editorial board of the *JHET* for nine years. How did this happen? Had your investment in the association already increased before this event (if so, how)?

Forget: I think Steve Medema invited me, although I don't know why. He's a pretty inclusive guy, even if he does smoke cigars. I never really thought about "investing" in HES. I liked the meetings; it was a place where people didn't think I was a little bit mad for caring about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No one thought I was wasting time and resources. I guess I hung around a lot. I think there were people working to make opportunities for me that I didn't even know about—people like Mary Morgan and Margaret Schabas. And Steve, of course. Bob Dimand. People have been very kind to me.

Gouverneur: You were co-editor (with Marcel Boumans) of the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* from 2008 to 2013. What do you remember in particular from this experience?

Forget: I remember how hard it was and how rewarding it was. So much was happening in both our lives, and yet we worked hard to get the journal out regularly. I liked to work with new writers—young scholars just submitting their first piece. I think Marcel and I had different strengths and different networks, so we played well together, I think. Editing a journal is really hard work, and I have a tremendous regard for the current *JHET* editors who have made many really excellent changes.

Gouverneur: After having served as a member of the executive committee of the HES in 2005 and as vice-president of the HES from 2007 to 2008, you served as president of the HES from 2017 to 2019. What were the highlights of this (these) mandate(s) for you?

Forget: I am very conscious of the work that so many people do to make our conferences, our society, and our journal work so well. We all owe Marianne Johnson a great debt. I hope we recognize that. I've seen the field grow and change. It is much more international than it used to be, and yet there are whole areas of the globe that we really don't reach at all. We've expanded beyond the Smith, Ricardo, [Karl] Marx, Mill canon, and yet we haven't really begun to understand the "economic thought" that drives ordinary people, including the workers we all describe so eloquently and so naively in our own histories. How do farm wives understand the economy at a particular time and place, and does it matter? We understand something about labor history, but the ideas we explore are those of the union brass as opposed to the guy running the lathe, or the adolescent girl at the loom. I'd like to know so much more about the economic ideas of ordinary people and the implications those ideas had for the ways that institutions developed and changed.

Gouverneur: During your mandate as president of the HES, you choose for the 2018 presidential address to talk about "Folk Wisdom in Economics," focusing on the role played by knowledge brokers in the history of economic thought. This text (then published as an article in *JHET*, 2020) echoes other works on the role, scope, and future of the history of economic thought (I think in particular to the 1998 to 2000 research project "Reconsidering the Role of the History of Economic Thought in Canadian Economics"). Can you tell us in a few words what, in your opinion, are the main elements that make the history of economic thought such an important discipline today?

Forget: You know, I'm going to end with a bunch of clichés. Here, I'll say: "let a hundred flowers bloom ..." There are fashions in any field, and what attracts people inside and outside the field right now is different from what drew attention in 1980, and I'm sure it is different from what will be all the rage twenty years from now. People have unique interests and strengths, and I think we should give them all space to explore. I'm not going to tell people how to do their work because we've all seen situations where the work that was scorned when it was first produced became tremendously important to later writers. I know that some of what I've written in the past makes me cringe today.

I'm not even going to try to argue that HET is important. I enjoy it, and I enjoy other kinds of economic research as well. For me, it's part of a package and if that means I'm not a good pin factory employee who generates all the returns of the division of labor for my employer, so be it. You can never please everyone. Sometimes you can't please anyone, so you might as well please yourself.

Gouverneur: You have been a mentor for younger scholars in the field of the history and philosophy of economics. How do you consider and feel about this role?

Forget: In October, I received an honorary degree of Doctor of Science from Queen's University in Canada. Part of the deal is that you are asked to address the graduating class. It's really intimidating. I may be old, but age and wisdom aren't closely correlated in my experience. I could think of only two things I wish I'd understood as a young person:

1. Failure is inevitable. You can't avoid it. You will fail, and more than once. Sometimes spectacularly and publicly. The only thing you can do is to be prepared for the

inevitability of failure. How will you react? What comes next? How do you pick yourself up and go on? I think, if you are very, very lucky, you learn something about humility. And kindness. Everyone fails, so be kind to the poor soul dealing with it right now.

2. Life is long. I've had so many opportunities in my life that I could never have imagined. It's easy to get stuck and to think that the way things are right now is the way they always will be. Everything changes. I was once working with an Indigenous Elder on a project whose favorite phrase echoed that of my grandmother: "and this too shall pass." Thank God for small mercies.

Gouverneur: A word for future generations of historians of economic thought?

Forget: Remember the Irish monks ...

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view a bibliography of Evelyn Forget's publications, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1053837222000803>.