

# TIMES OF CHANGE

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*A personal account of their experiences by Marcel Boumans and Evelyn Forget as JHET editors of issues 31 (1) to 35 (4).*

When our editorial transition began in July 2008, the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought (JHET)* had just changed its publisher from Routledge to Cambridge University Press (CUP). Our first issue in March 2009 (volume 31, number 1) had a wonderful new cover, still in use, designed by former editor Steve Medema, that featured an extract from Adam Smith at the top fading into Alfred Marshall below. We faced two primary challenges. First, we wanted to continue on the solid editorial path that Steve Medema had laid, encouraging new contributors and new ideas to join the stalwarts of the field. And second, we faced the far less enjoyable prospect of transitioning to an electronic interface.

We took on the creative aspects of editing with zeal, forming a new editorial team with H. Spencer Banzhaf as book review editor and writing an ambitious editorial inviting “submissions from a wide variety of perspectives that use a range of historical methods [and] imaginative new approaches” (Boumans and Forget 2009, p. 1).

To “encourage new voices and new insights” (p. 1), we wanted to create an editorial board membership that would not only contribute to the prestige of the journal but also reflect the membership of our History of Economics Society (HES) so that prospective authors might see *JHET* as an appropriate outlet for their work. We tried to diversify the editorial board in terms of gender and geographic spread, although we were more successful with the latter than the former. While the board consisted of members living in the United States (five), Canada (four), the United Kingdom (four), Australia (one), France (two), Brazil (one), Germany (one), Italy (one), Japan (one), and the Netherlands (one), only one-quarter was female. We organized editorial lunch meetings at each HES

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conference, sponsored by CUP, with the idea of hearing new ideas and important criticism from editorial board members. With this excellent team we edited five volumes (31 [1] to 35 [4]). The only change in this team was when (from issue 34 [2] onwards) Maria Pia Paganelli replaced Spencer Banzhaf as book review editor.

When we re-examine the content of those five volumes, we must admit that our achievements fell a bit short of our ambitions. One of us is happier than the other to note that most of the articles we published continued to approach our field as history of economic thought. Both of us are happy to see that we moved far beyond familiar names, like Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes. There were quite a number of articles about more unfamiliar characters, but only two about women (Eveline Mabel Burns and Mary Clare de Graffenried). Similarly, the authors we published reflected a broad array of nationalities, so that we can rightly claim that *JHET* continued its transition to a more international journal. Yet, the vast majority of authors were still male.

*JHET* holds a special position as a HES journal. That means the *Journal*, as we wrote in our editorial, is “a community of scholars, with each of us playing in turn the roles of author, reader and referee,” and so “ultimately it is the readers, authors and the referees who set the tone and content of a journal” (p. 1). There is not a lot of room for a dominant editorial voice, but as editors we wanted to do more than just wait to see what might be submitted. We wanted to welcome early-career scholars, both to encourage their careers and to give the larger community a taste of what the future has in store. As a consequence, we opened the pages of *JHET* for dissertation abstracts. It created greater diversity in a few dimensions—approach, topic, and geographic location—but we had less success in terms of gender than we had hoped. There were, however, glimmers of promise; women, mostly from Europe, who would soon become much more prominent were beginning to complete degrees and appear in our pages.

We would like to take credit for our modest success at encouraging diversity, but we were really just benefitting from the changes that were already beginning to take place in our field. As editors, we tried to open the door a bit wider to welcome scholars with new or dissenting positions so that potential authors would feel free to challenge dominant positions and contribute to a lively and viable scholarly community. That is challenging for any editor, and we are delighted with some of the innovations introduced by Jimena Hurtado and Pedro Duarte.

In particular, they have recognized the challenges faced by historians whose first language is not English. History is a narrative discipline, which makes it very dependent on how well ideas are expressed. As a consequence, non-English authors are always one step behind their English-speaking colleagues, no matter how great the contribution they might make. Under the watch of Duarte and Hurtado, the editors have organized a series of writing workshops especially for early-career scholars.

Another welcome innovation is the “Meet the *JHET* Authors” webpage on the *JHET* website. It displays a nice mixture of senior and junior, male and female historians from around the world, showcasing the diversity of the discipline and welcoming new contributors. A clever use of the rapidly evolving technology may achieve what we struggled to achieve with the tools and knowledge we had in our time.

The excitement of moving along the scholarly path, however, was dampened a bit by our frustration with the developing technology. One particular challenge we faced was the transition to an electronic interface (ScholarOne Manuscripts) for managing the manuscripts and review process. The last self-written editorial letter was sent in October

2011. It indeed eventually lessened some of the workload, although the transition process meant that we were actually using both systems simultaneously for a while. It also made contacts with the authors and reviewers less personal and we struggled to find the right balance.

The move to Cambridge University Press as publisher opened the door for some of the changes we wanted to make. The journal was on a fine footing financially and, in fact, we expanded the number of published pages to reduce the publication backlog that was verging on two years. It is always reassuring for editors to know that there are good solid papers in the pipeline, but it is incredibly frustrating for authors, especially for those early in their careers, to wait so long for work to appear.

Cambridge University Press also offered to take over our society membership list. The society was pleased to relinquish control of this task, but the experience was far less successful than we had hoped. As editors, we had constant queries from HES members about missing journal issues. When we investigated, we found members had been omitted from the lists. Other members did not receive renewal notification, or did not recognize it when it appeared in their inboxes. Managing the clerical aspects of society memberships was something we had not bargained on. As a consequence of ongoing disorder, the History of Economics Society took back the membership lists, which made editing the journal much more pleasant.

The transition to Cambridge University Press also opened the door for *JHET* to be listed in the Web of Science and to obtain an Impact Factor, which is purported to measure how significant a journal is by calculating the frequency with which an average article in the journal is cited in a particular year or five-year period. During our tenure as editors, we were focused on ensuring that *JHET* was listed and received an Impact Factor because so many universities and granting agencies worldwide were beginning to pay attention to these measures. It was never clear why it took so long to list *JHET*, and we are grateful for the help we received from Cambridge. Of course, a tiny field with few journals in which journal articles have a long half-life will always be disadvantaged in this game. The anguish over Impact Factors, however, became much more significant after we stepped down as editors. We were simply focused on being invited to the game.

Most editors will claim that the most rewarding aspect of being a *JHET* editor is the opportunity to learn from members of the HES community. As editor, you are in an excellent position to learn what everyone is engaged with, interested in, and motivated by. We also had the privilege to see new ideas and new trends emerging and to more fully recognize the value of all the work that had come before. It was as editors that we really came to understand the history of our own craft, and to see how the incremental work of scholars in our own discipline contributed to the evolution of the field.

This had also another advantage. Consistency and continuity of HES policy was a challenge before the adoption of the new constitution in June 2016 and, indeed, was the primary reason for the creation of a new constitution. The term of the president was only one year, and the term for the elected members of the executive committee lasted three years. That meant that only the secretary and treasurer, with average terms of about five years, were able to warrant the consistency and continuity of former executive decisions. *JHET* editors are non-voting members of the executive because the *Journal* is the society's journal, and therefore the editors need to be aware of any discussion and decision that may have an impact on *JHET*. At the same time, because *JHET* editors have an average term of five years, they can also play a role in maintaining institutional

memory for the society. Consistency and continuity of HES policy and consistency and continuity of *JHET* editorial policy go hand-in-hand.

On reflection, our years as editors were incredibly rewarding but also a time of some very hard, sometimes unrelenting, work. We faced challenges we could not have expected, and we are very grateful to Steve Medema, Craufurd Goodwin, and Paul Dudenhefer, who walked us through a few minefields and, at least, helped us laugh at some of our experiences. We learned a lot about our colleagues and about ourselves and, perhaps, developed a bit more patience for when we face slow editorial processes or less than enthusiastic referees from other journals. We are especially grateful for the generosity of spirit with which so many society members received referee requests and offered support. In the end, *JHET* is, as we said in 2011, a society journal, and we are grateful for the opportunity you all gave us to play our part as editors for a short period of time. Thank you.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

## REFERENCE

- Boumans, Marcel, and Evelyn L. Forget. 2009. "From the editors." *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 31 (1): 1–2.