

# Introduction

*Marjorie Griffin Cohen*

This issue of *Atlantis* is a celebration of the life and work of feminist economist Michèle Pujol, who died of cancer in August 1997. Michèle was one of a small number of feminist economists in the world who, by their critiques of mainstream economic analysis, are able to challenge the very basis of thought that continues to justify inequalities and oppression in our society. I met her briefly only a few times, so did not know her personally. But from the time that I first became aware of her published material, when she was a graduate student, I realized that her work would make a major contribution to a feminist understanding of our world.<sup>1</sup>

Her most important academic work, *Feminism and Anti-Feminism in Early Economic Thought*, was the first serious and systematic examination of the development of the interaction between economic thought and feminist thinking.<sup>2</sup> Other feminists have written about the androcentric nature of mainstream economic theory, but until this book, most were unaware of the extent to which the early thinkers, who shaped the discourse of the discipline, were made aware by feminists of the narrowness of their approaches. It was not, as is often believed, that thinking about economics was a male exercise and that these men blindly followed normal societal convention in ignoring women's reality. In this book Michèle Pujol shows, rather, that their antipathy to a more inclusive economics was a conscious rejection of feminist analysis, a rejection which often reveals deep-seated misogyny.

Any feminist dealing with the real world today knows that the logic of economists when discussing social and economic policy is a hard nut to crack. The academic discipline has enveloped its work in "objective," "scientific" approaches, focusing on the manipulation of data within what appears to be a hermetically sealed logic. By

accepting the assumption on which models are built, the mainstream economists have constructed a powerful defense against criticism. The demands by some women for a more rational and equitable economy and one more focused on meeting collective needs, is easily dismissed as unscientific, unrealistic, and impractical. The assumptions on which economic models are built are almost never questioned by the mainstream, although when pressed, any theorist would recognize that without valid assumptions, the findings are questionable.

In *Feminism and Anti-Feminism*, Michèle Pujol uncovers not only the problems with economic assumptions in the process of building models, but also unpacks the flawed logic of economists when dealing specifically with women. With great skill she exposes the internal inconsistencies in the arguments of the "great" economic thinkers and also shows the ways in which their methodology departs from its usual rigor when their subject happens to be women. Her examination of the work of early feminist economists such as Mill, Taylor and Bodichon is important because it shows both that alternative approaches were being developed and that they received "glib dismissal" by mainstream economists.

*Feminism and Anti-Feminism* focuses on economic thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it has particular relevance today. The logic of neoclassical thought is repeatedly used in public policy debates to argue against "interfering" with the market to achieve social objectives. This logic directly affects women when it deals with those policies designed to improve either women's entry into occupations or increases in pay. For example, the Canadian right-wing economic think-tank, the Fraser Institute, maintains that any actions to raise women's wages, either through minimum wages or

equal pay legislation, will actually be counterproductive for women. They argue that these measures would make women less "attractive" as workers and would take away the most powerful lever women have for moving into new areas of employment - that is, lower pay for equal productivity. These are ideas that are based on a very strict and fanatical adherence to the kind of logic that was being developed at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the early giants in the development of economic thought, A.C. Pigou, when dealing with equal pay issues, argued along similar lines. As Michèle points out, these arguments supported the status quo in market relations by making the market's actions appear beneficial to women.

Michèle's critique of the origins of these ideas is extraordinarily helpful to women who are up against their reincarnation about one hundred years later. While the ideas are easy to refute when dealing with policies like equal pay, their wider role in shaping the structures of our world unravel less easily. Feminists, whether economists or not, know that allowing markets to unfold "naturally" is not in the interests of the disadvantaged of this world. Market power accrues to the ruthless and the already powerful. But the ideas that privilege market "choices" are particularly virulent in the reshaping of the world through processes we collectively know as "globalization."

I've titled this issue of *Atlantis* "Sexual Economics" because I want to invoke the overwhelmingly gendered nature of the subject of economics. When Kate Millet wrote *Sexual Politics* in the late 1960s, the notion that relationships between males and females were political ones was taken further by her insistence that sexual domination is the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides us with our most basic concept of power. Sexual domination is so critical to our way of thinking that the subjugation becomes "naturalized," mainly because, as Millet explains, "the function of norm is unthinkingly delegated to the male" (Millet, 32).

Rethinking our concept of power has given important insight to feminists and has enabled us to understand everyday, private acts of oppression as

part of larger conditioning frameworks. So, while an individual may oppress, it is the ideas that shape our society that allow this oppression to take its normalizing aspect. The main vehicle to enable oppression of any group is the organization of the economic system, at all levels of activity from the local to the international. The way the economy is structured gives some individuals economic power and, by making this power part of a normal functioning of the way in which people make their daily living, oppression itself comes to be seen as inevitable or natural. This naturalizing of economic power cuts across all social divides - gender, race, age, physical conditions, come quickly to mind. The crucial insight that Kate Millet made about politics can be reasserted with economics. Power relationships (politics) are gendered. But the main manifestation of those power relationships is through the economic ideas a society accepts and the economic structures it sets in place.

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The Features section of this issue of *Atlantis* is devoted specifically to Michèle Pujol. Her article, "Into the Margin!" was published in 1995 in a collection edited by Edith Kuiper and Jolande Sap entitled *Out of the Margins*, and it is reproduced here both because it is not widely accessible in Canada and because it represents the thinking which Michèle worked on as she compared earlier economic thought to contemporary theory. This issue is specifically devoted to Michèle's professional work, although the remembrances of two of her friends and her poems will give some indication of the other passions in her life. Keith Louise Fulton writes about her time at the University of Winnipeg and Christine St. Peter talks about her impact at the University of Victoria. Michèle was a published poet and four of her poems are reproduced. The cover art for this edition is a montage designed by Jaclynne Campbell at Simon Fraser University Media Services, based on photographs taken by Michèle's partner, Brook Holdack.

The other pieces in this issue do not focus specifically on Michèle Pujol's work. The intention, rather, is to explore various feminist ideas about

economic issues that affect the way we think and the way we live. Some of these articles are by academic economists and are about topics which are close to the kind of work Michèle did. Specifically, Frances Woolley discusses the methodological differences between feminists and neoclassical welfare economics and shows ways in which feminists can evaluate economic policy. Fiona MacPhail analyzes the debate about growing inequality and points to the contradictions which arise when motherwork is not figured into the calculation of what makes someone poor.

Some of the articles deal directly with the issue of economic policy and the ways in which it affects women. Katherine Side writes about right-wing economic policies of the Harris government in Ontario by examining the underlying assumptions about women's friendships in the policy. As government abdicates its responsibilities to people, it expects women, through friendships, to make up for what the government takes away, something Side has discovered does not happen. Karen Hadley examines restructuring which has occurred at Northern Telecom and talks about why women were sometimes attracted by the restructuring discourse of management. She also examines the effects of changes on these women factory workers.

An interview with Vandana Shiva, an activist from India, focuses on issues which result from the hyper-marketization of economies through the process of "globalization." And Zéna Seldon and Dawn Farough examine financial institutions' discriminatory practices with regard to mortgage funding for women. The findings of this study are important because very little empirical work of this kind had previously been done in Canada. Also dealing with a public policy issue is Catherine Malone's piece about her (unhappy?) experiences as a pay equity officer in a large engineering firm. She tells us what is wrong about the current federal employment equity legislation and what needs to change.

Most of this issue indicates the extent to which feminist analyses of the economy are alive and active toward the end of the twentieth century. Two articles also show us that women have been

important to the development of economic ideas in Canada for some time. Marianne Ainley's piece on Mabel Timlin discusses her roles in fostering economics as an academic discipline and furthering an understanding of the work of John Maynard Keynes in Canada. Jeanne Laux writes about her friend and well-known economist Irene Spry, who recently died at the age of ninety-one and who continued until the end of her life to be the centre of weekly luncheon discussions in Ottawa about economic ideas and policies.

Two articles in this issue are not about economic policy, but do examine topics which were vital to Michèle Pujol. Habiba Zaman, a friend of Michèle's at the University of Victoria, writes about Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin in the context of post-colonial religious fundamentalism and the complexities of feminism in South Asia. Maryanne Dever, Denise Cuthbert and Anna Dacre examine the experiences of Women's Studies graduates and how well prepared they are for employment.

The poetry in this volume is by Kate Braid, Ruramisai Charumbira, Ruth Panofsky, and Prashant Ziskind. These poems were chosen both for their excellence and for the relevance they had to women's economic lives and to the life and work of Michèle Pujol.

I would like to express my thanks to the *Atlantis* editorial panel for its assistance and general professionalism which made my work as guest editor a pleasure. Many people were involved in the publication effort, but specifically I would like to mention Cecily Barrie, Marilyn Porter and Christine St. Peter for their excellent advice and encouragement and Barbara Brown for her copyediting skills. My very special thanks go to Margaret Manery, at Simon Fraser University, who assisted me at this end of the continent with her superb organizational and research abilities. I was sustained throughout by her consistent good humour and enthusiasm for this project.

## ENDNOTES

1. This was "Gender and Class" in Marshall's *Principles of Economics*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 8 (1984) 217-34.
2. This book developed from her PhD thesis, *Economic*

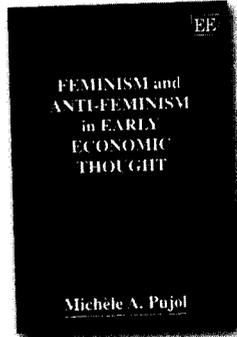
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