

JANE MARCET AND THE SCHOLARSHIP OF POPULARIZATION

This essay argues that Jane Marcet was engaged in the work of the knowledge broker – facilitating the creation, sharing and use of economic knowledge. She created and maintained social and intellectual networks between and among scientists and the larger public. Knowledge sharing was based upon the personal and social connections she facilitated by entertaining bankers, scientists, and professional economists such as Malthus, Ricardo, Mill and others, from Britain and the continent, at her London *salon*, culturally rooted in the Genevan expatriate community. It was extended to the middle classes through the many editions of her *Conversations On Political Economy*. Her networks were enlarged to include the working classes as she constructed her *John Hopkin's Notions on Political Economy* at the behest of Henry Brougham and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Her work was not a simple vulgarization of knowledge created by others, but rather active work at the boundaries of various bodies of discourse among which knowledge flowed in all directions.

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I: Introduction

Older views of the popularization of science envision knowledge transfer as a one-way process, where insights developed by professional “scientists” are simplified for a passive lay audience. This imagined process implies that true science – that is, scientific publications aimed at other professional scientists – is superior to the vulgarized version suitable for amateurs incapable of understanding complexity and subtlety. Professionals, intrigued by the history of their discipline, would for the most part be drawn to their professional predecessors to the relative neglect, or even derision, of popularizers.

Jane Marcet was clearly a popularizer of political economy. Alfred Marshall’s claim that Marcet presented economic principles “without the conditions required to make them true” (Henderson 1995, 43) reflects this view of popularization.

Some have begun to question whether knowledge translation should be regarded as a one-way transfer of information from the professional who discovers it, to the amateur who needs merely to understand an issue in broad outline (Myers 2003; Hilgartner 1990; Grundmann and Cavaillé 2000). They dispute the clear distinctions drawn between the two bodies of discourse, and envision the process itself as a reflexive one in which communication flows in all directions, and professional science and scientists are influenced by popular culture, even as that culture is transformed by scientific insights (Barer 2005). Under this view, the popularizer changes from someone dependent upon and subordinate to the real scientists, into a knowledge broker – someone who facilitates the creation, sharing and use of knowledge. By definition, the knowledge broker is not engaged in a one-way process of knowledge transfer, but rather helps to create the multi-modal network of communications between and among professional scientists and the broader culture.

How does our understanding and evaluation of Jane Marcet’s work change if we view it through a lens coloured by this concept of knowledge brokering? The contrast between the intellectual respect shown for Marcet by contemporaries such as TR Malthus, James Mill, J.-B. Say, and her dismissal by Marshall, is striking. Her contemporaries clearly thought she was doing more than vulgarizing their work.

I argue that Marcet was engaged in the work of the knowledge broker – creating and maintaining networks between and among scientists and the larger public. Knowledge sharing was based upon the personal and social connections she facilitated by bringing together bankers, scientists, and professional economists such as Malthus, Ricardo, Mill and others. It was extended to the popular culture through the many editions of her *Conversations* addressed to the middle classes, and enlarged to include the working classes with her *John Hopkin’s Notions on Political Economy* and her cooperation with Henry Brougham and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Her correspondence with continental thinkers enlarged the worldview of classical economics,

and allowed her to maintain a theory of value similar to J.-B. Say's utility theory in her work, distinct from the dominant analyses of the classical school. This last highlights the intellectual creativity involved in knowledge brokering. In the same way that creativity is facilitated by networks that bring together disparate social circles, a popular text that juxtaposes elements from distinct theoretical approaches challenges both the lay readers of a text and the professionals upon whose work it is purportedly based.

This interpretation builds upon Willie Henderson's attempt to place Marcet within an "educational frame", arguing that such a shift in perspective changes her work from "mere capitalist propaganda" to "sophisticated curriculum development" (Henderson 1995, 13). Bette Polkinghorn (1993, 1995, 2000) and Dorothy Thompson (1973) also value Marcet's contributions to economic education. Knowledge brokering contains within it adult education, but the concept extends beyond education in that it values the creation and maintenance of knowledge networks among disciplinary professionals, between professionals in various disciplines, and between the professionals and the educated public – in this case, the bankers, financial experts and policy makers who extend disciplinary expertise into the real world.

II: Jane Marcet and The Geneva Heritage

Jane Haldimand (1769-1858)¹ was born in London to an English mother, Jane Pickersgill, and a Swiss (but not Genevan) father, named Antoine Haldimand. The prosperous banking family had ten children, of whom she was the eldest. She was educated at home by tutors alongside her brothers. When Jane was 15, her mother died in childbirth and Jane became her father's hostess at his twice-weekly parties. He entertained a large social circle that included bankers, writers, scientists and politicians, and was frequently visited by continental acquaintances.

Jane became engaged to marry a cousin in the navy, but dissolved the arrangement because of her father's disapproval of the character of her fiancé. At the age of 30, she found herself unmarried and a desirable prospect because she stood to inherit a full share of her father's fortune. Many men presented themselves, including the physician Alexandre Marcet who had left Geneva to study medicine in Edinburgh in 1793. In 1798, after France annexed Geneva, he decided to relocate permanently to London. They married in 1799, after a one-month engagement.

Alexandre's decision to study medicine in Edinburgh was part of an established tradition of intellectual exchange. He carried letters of introduction to Dugald Stewart from his brother-in-law Pierre Prévost, who was a Professor of the Academy of Geneva. He was introduced to the Scottish chemist Joseph Black by Jean de Carro and Louis Odier, both Edinburgh-trained medical doctors who played a large part in the introduction of the smallpox vaccine on the continent, and by the natural philosopher and Academy of Geneva Professor Marc-Auguste Pictet (Bahar 2001, 30-34).

¹ Biographical data on Jane Haldimand Marcet is presented by Polkinghorn in detail in her 1993 biography, and summarized in Polkinghorn (2000). My summary is based on her archival work.

Alexandre preferred chemistry to medicine, but he was not able to devote himself full-time to that pursuit until Jane's father died in 1817, leaving her a very rich woman. As the wife of Alexandre Marcet, Jane carried her social activities from her father's house to her own, continuing to entertain the growing Swiss expatriate community in London, transient visitors from abroad, and the overlapping scientific contacts of her husband, brother and father.

Among the many regular visitors to the home of Jane and Alexandre Marcet was Henry Brougham, who would go on to found the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1827 and convince a somewhat reluctant Jane Marcet to write *John Hopkin's Notions on Political Economy*. Guest lists included Henry Hallam, founder of the Statistical Society, Sidney Smith, Humphry Davy, botanist Augustin de Candolle, mathematician HB de Saussure (Lindee 1991, 10; Polkinghorn 1993).

Between 1803 and 1809, Jane gave birth to four children – two boys (one of whom died at 13) and two girls. She was able to employ governesses for her children, and in their early years arranged for her children an education similar to what she had received. That is, all of her children studied the same subjects at home from the same teachers. When the Marcets decided to send the eldest son to Cambridge, they enrolled him in Winchester School at the age of 12. He very much disliked the arrangement, and made his feelings known by running away on several occasions. Finally, the Marcets decided to send him to Geneva to live with his uncle where he remained for four years, again receiving the kind of education he much preferred.

Jane Marcet's first book, *Conversations on Chemistry*, was written after she attended a lecture series on chemistry. It was published anonymously because she wanted to avoid an apparent conflict of interest because of the professional activities of her husband (Polkinghorn 1993, 24).

In 1809, Jane's younger brother William, who lived with the Marcets, became Director of the Bank of England. Names of political economists began to appear on the guest lists more frequently; she entertained the Malthuses, the Ricardos and James Mill. Jane had first been introduced to political economy when she attended a series of lectures at the Royal Society given by Sidney Smith (Polkinghorn 1993, 41). William Marcet and David Ricardo shared an interest in the appropriate role of the Bank of England in maintaining the value of the currency, and the Marcet home was the site of several debates related to the Bullion controversy. The stage seemed set for the creation of the *Conversations on Political Economy*. Because of the dramatic market success of her first book, Longmans was keen to publish such a work and the first edition appeared in 1816.

Jane went on to write texts on a variety of topics including astronomy, botany, mineralogy, physics, the "evidences of Christianity", as well as a number of books for children. Over her life, she published thirty books on a wide variety of topics, most of which went through multiple revisions and editions. Alexandre died unexpectedly in 1822, and Jane credited her deep faith in Christianity, along with her writing, for helping

her overcome the subsequent depression. She lived to see her children established and her literary work well respected. She died in London, aged 89, at the home of her daughter and son-in-law.

III. Geneva Society and Knowledge Brokering

If we claim that knowledge brokering includes the serious activity of creating and maintaining social networks, then we must place her *salon* into a historical perspective. Three features of Jane's upbringing suggest that we should take the Genevan heritage seriously. First, she was educated at home in the same subjects as her brothers. Second, on her father's death she stood to inherit a full share of his fortune. Third, she was introduced at a very early age to the elaborate social activities in her parent's home, suggesting that such entertaining was considered a serious social task that had to be maintained even after the premature death of Jane's mother.

Many studies have attempted to place the Huguenot community with its well-developed international network and considerable private wealth drawn from banking and finance into the social, political and ideological framework of the eighteenth century (Bahar 2001; Montandon 1975; Taylor 1981; Tremblay 1988; Pocock 1999). Significantly, well-off Genevan families were personally responsible for the education of their children, and girls were often educated in the same subjects and in the same manner as were their brothers (Bahar 2001, 32; see also Fry and Michaëlis 1997). Jane Marcet benefited from this tradition, and after her mother's death, she undertook some instructional activities for her younger siblings.

The exposure of women from well-off families to science was not unique to Geneva, of course, but might be seen as the hallmark of Enlightenment science (Schiebinger 1989, Findlen 1995). It was, however, one of the factors that made the *salons* of Geneva so intellectually stimulating. Women played a significant role in the social networking – the creation of guest lists, the mixing of more and less distinct social circles, the consolidation of social and intellectual connections. At the same time, the core of the community was tightly knit, and the social and intellectual values that governed intellectual life in Geneva persisted as the circle was extended.

The image that emerges is one of Jane Marcet located in the centre of a vast and intricate web of social, political and intellectual connections. The financial resources of her family allowed her to play the role of hostess, while the intellectual connections of her father, brother and husband created a social base that she extended dramatically through the very real work of the *salonnière*. Significantly, hers was not an English *salon*, but rather one with very elaborate continental branches. This allowed her to place her own work not only within the context of British classical economics, but also to consider how British classical economics fits into the broader context of continental thought. Our reconsideration has already moved her far beyond that of a “mere propagandist” who promulgates principles without understanding complexity. In fact, we can go further.

IV: The Conversations On Political Economy

The first edition of the *Conversations on Political Economy* was published in 1816, and is rightly seen as an exercise in popularization. Marcet's intent was clear:

I can assure you that the greatest pleasure I derive from success is the hope of doing good by the propagation of useful truths amongst a class of people, who, excepting in a popular familiar form, would never have become acquainted with them. (letter to Pierre Prevost, 21 September 1816, Archive de la fondation Augustin de Candolle, Geneva; cited in Polkinghorn 1993, 48)

Are we then to conclude that this dilettante, drawing upon her social connections and attendance at public lectures, simply took the principles established by well-known political economists and presented them in an easy-to-read format for readers of privilege? (Despite the apparent attempt at writing a school-book, it has already been established that Marcet's readers were adults and not primarily children.)

If we perceive Marcet as a knowledge broker, we would expect to find evidence that communication was not a one-way activity, but rather that, through Marcet, the public became aware of the ideas of professionals, professionals were tasked with new challenges presented to them by Marcet, and that Marcet herself played an active role in facilitating that two-way communication. We do find all of this.

The transmission of professional knowledge more broadly through a popular book is relatively straightforward, and has been the focus of most critics who have attempted to place Marcet in context. The contrivance of the governess (Mrs. B) charged with teaching two female students (Emily and Caroline) first appeared in *Conversations on Chemistry* and was carried through many of Marcet's subsequent works. Emily (who rather liked to blow things up and does not appear in the *Conversations on Political Economy*) and the more serious Caroline have interesting names. Emily is perhaps the feminine counterpart of Rousseau's *Emile* who, on occasion, was accompanied by a rather less serious female student named Caroline. Marcet is, after all, a woman of her time.

How do we understand Hilda Hollis's claim that the gender of Mrs. B and Caroline reinforce an "unfeminist" agenda, by allowing Marcet to dismiss Caroline's objections to the policy implications of classical economics as "'feminine' and naïve", and noting that Mrs. B "clearly defers to the male master-thinkers in political economy" thereby reinforcing the professionalization of political economy (Hollis 386)? After all, the gender of the student, as Hollis acknowledges, may as easily have been a "protofeminist argument in the line of Wollstonecraft" (386). There is at least one instance in which neither Caroline nor Mrs. B defers to classical male authority: the value of commodities is determined by "the real intrinsic value which induces people to give money for them. Labour, you will observe, is valuable only if it gives utility to an object" (Marcet 1816).

This is not the only instance in which Marcet distinguishes herself from the dominant themes of the British classical school. She, again like J-B Say, builds on the optimism of Adam Smith rather than scarcities foreseen by Malthus and Ricardo. She was not convinced that the working classes would necessarily continue to expand, eroding the standard of living. Nor was she convinced that there were natural limits to growth

imposed by resource scarcity. Hers was the much more optimistic classical economics of Adam Smith and J.-B. Say, in which the savings of capitalists support almost limitless growth, than the “dismal science” of Ricardo and Malthus.

From the perspective of the present, many might argue that classical economics is defined by its theory of value, that resource scarcity is central to the analysis and follows directly from the theory of rent, and that some kind of a Malthusian population mechanism is central to the story. And yet, Marcet is generally praised for her explanation of rents, while rejecting the rest of the story. What is she popularizing?

We do Marcet a disservice to see her merely as engaged in offering “adults of the wealthy classes . . . a sophisticated justification of their wealth in the face of growing unrest and political theories questioning financial inequality” or “the strategic promotion amongst middle- and upper-class adults of the New Poor Law” (Hollis, 380). Part of what she did was to bring the insights of classical economics to bear on social questions, as a counterweight to the “prejudices and popular feeling of uninformed benevolence” (Marcet vi). But that was only part of the story. Another part of what she did was to bring together the insights of continental thinkers with the writings of the English classical school, and thereby challenge those economists to decide what was central to the story, and what peripheral. As the various editions of the *Conversations on Political Economy* rolled off the presses, Marcet enlarged her continental network to include another generation of continental liberals, such as Rossi.

Jane Marcet, through the agency of her intellectual *salon* and through her books helped consolidate the ideas of bankers such as her brother and those whom we would see as professional political economists like Malthus and Ricardo. She made those ideas accessible, perhaps less to the young people identified as the audience in the preface, than to the middle classes – the political actors, bankers and business people who would not take the time to puzzle through Ricardo or even Malthus. She challenged the rather insular English classical school to take seriously the ideas of continental economists such as J.-B. Say by inserting those ideas into a popular book, even if she did not attempt to develop a theoretical framework that could accommodate all those elements. She maintained an intellectual distance from some of the central tenets of classical economics, but continued the conversation with its masters, sometimes accepting criticism and other times keeping her own counsel. Her participation was active; she was not simply transmitting wisdom created by professionals to unschooled amateurs. The networks she established were certainly constrained; there was, for example, no attempt to draw the working classes into the conversation. But it is a conversation, and not a lecture transmitted through a translator.

V. Reception and Influence of the *Conversations on Political Economy*

Marcet’s *Conversations on Political Economy* went through at least fourteen legal editions² and was translated into French (at least twice), Dutch, German and Spanish. It

² See the list of citations for the editions I found. Both Polkinghorn (p. 57) and Thompson claim the book went through 16 editions. I found 14 between the British Library, the Kress and the Library of Congress.

had a measurable impact on at least four distinct audiences. First, there were the “young persons” to whom Marcet explicitly addressed her work. Second, there were the textbook writers and popularizers, including Harriet Martineau, Jean-Baptiste Say, Millicent Garrett Fawcett and others, who drew confidence from her success and took lessons from her style. Third, she was noticed by the great political economists of the nineteenth century, such as Malthus, JS Mill and others. And finally there were the politicians and bankers, the men of affairs with whom she socialized.

a. Reaching Young Minds

One of the great achievements of Marcet’s *Conversations on Chemistry* had been to help ignite a scientific passion in the young Michael Faraday. He entered the shop of a bookseller and bookbinder in 1804 at the age of thirteen, and worked there for the next eight years. During that time, he read the books he was surrounded by and cites two as particularly helpful. From the *Encyclopedia Britannica* he learned something of electricity, and from Mrs. Marcet’s *Conversations on Chemistry* he learned the first principles of that science. In a letter written somewhat later, Faraday recounts his experiences:

[I]t was in those books I found the beginning of my philosophy...and Mrs. Marcet’s *Conversations on Chemistry* which gave me my foundation in that science...I felt that I had got hold of an ancor [sic] in chemical knowledge, and clung fast to it. Hence my deep veneration for Mrs. Marcet: first, as one able to convey the truth and principle of those boundless fields of knowledge which concern natural things, to the young, untaught, and inquiring mind. (Edgar Fahs Smith, *Old Chemistries*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1927, pp 67-68.)

It was, perhaps, a contrivance when Marcet addressed her *Conversations on Political Economy* to “young persons”, and there is no evidence of a Michael Faraday drawn to the study of political economy through Caroline’s lessons. Nevertheless, her textbook did ignite a passion, if not in the hearts of young readers, then in those of their parents who began to see political economy as a very fashionable subject for young ladies to study. The novelist Maria Edgeworth, who was friendly with the Marcets, claimed:

It has now become high fashion with blue ladies to talk political economy. There is a certain Lady Mary Shepherd who makes a great jabbering on this subject... Mean time fine ladies now require that their daughters’ governesses should teach political economy. Pray Ma’am said a fine Mamma to one who came to offer herself as a governess, “Do you teach political economy?” The governess who had thought she had provided herself well with French Italian Music drawing dancing &c was quite astounded by this unexpected requisition; she hesitatingly answered “No Ma’am I cannot say I teach political economy, but I would if you think it proper try to learn it”. “Oh dear no Ma’am. If you don’t teach it you wont do for me”. (Colvin 1971: 364).

No doubt there are translations I’ve missed, and there were certainly pirated editions because international copyright law was in its infancy. Because these editions were intended as popularizations, there was perhaps less effort into collecting and preserving every single version in print.

To some extent the “fashion” for political economy predates Jane Marcet. In France and Geneva, it was a fashionable topic in intellectual *salons* throughout the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Marcet did, however, give the fashion new life and firmly established it in Britain. This was a function of style as much as intent; her *Conversations on Chemistry* had the same attraction among intellectual women. Mme de Stael, a well-known *salonnière* in Geneva with whom the Marcets were associated, wrote to tell the Marcet’s that she had “proposed the study of chemistry in the dialogues of Mrs. Marcet” (de Stael 1816, quoted in Polkinghorn: 30).

b. Textbook Writers and Popularizers

Marcet’s success in reaching impressionable minds attracted the attention of others with similar goals. Marcet has been appreciated as an educator, as a teacher of political economy (Watts and Weiner; Bahar; Henderson; Shackleton). Few, however, have recognized just how profoundly her educational techniques paralleled the developing science of education at the end of the eighteenth century. The use of the student names Caroline and Emily has already alerted us to the potential influence of Rousseau on Marcet. It would, however, be far more surprising that someone intent on education should ignore Rousseau. The pervasiveness of Rousseauvian ideas in late eighteenth century France and Geneva, both faithfully rendered and vulgarized, can hardly be exaggerated. For most educators, however, including Marcet, those ideas reduce to some fairly simple precepts. First, the dialogue format was fundamental in formal classes, and imagined as most useful for teaching children and those who already had a reasonable education. Teaching in dialogue form predates Socrates, and yet the particular realization of that format in the eighteenth century is unique. It is somewhat surprising for twenty-first century readers, however, to realize that one of the ways the dialogue format appeared in late eighteenth-century France was in the form of a catechism. After the French Revolution, the Roman Catholic Church was no longer the profound influence it might have been earlier, yet the secular catechism as a rhetorical device flourished.

Jean-Baptiste Say was among the first to congratulate Marcet for her *Conversations on Political Economy*, and only partly because Marcet adopted his theory of value rather than looking to Ricardo or Malthus as authorities. He appreciated her less as a political economist, than as a would-be popularizer:

You have worked much more efficiently than I to popularize and to spread extremely useful ideas; and you will succeed Madame, since you have built on the strength of science.... It is not possible to stay closer to the truth with more charm; to clothe such indisputable principles with a more elegant style. I am an old soldier who asks only to die in your light. (Polkinghorn 1985, 167).

More significantly, perhaps, he requested her permission to translate “sizeable passages from your excellent book”, which he did in his *Cours complet d’économie politique pratique* (1828). This affinity is not surprising when one considers that much of Say’s work, including the *Cours complet* and the *Catéchisme d’économie politique* (1815) were devoted to education.

A second form of education, usually directed towards the lower orders, the members of which were commonly believed not to be able to follow a rational presentation of material building from simple to more complex, involved presenting “principles” cloaked in examples from life. Harriet Martineau is a name that more frequently comes to mind when considering nineteenth-century popularizers, and she was master of this form. Although the styles of the two women were very distinct, they were friends and they did share their work. Martineau reports that, when she read Marcet’s *Conversations* in 1827, she was surprised to find that she had been teaching political economy “unawares”: “it struck me at once that the principles of the whole science might be advantageously conveyed in the same way, – not by being smothered up in a story, but by being exhibited in their natural workings in selected passages of social life” (Martineau *Autobiography* I: 138). This insight led to a change in Martineau’s presentation, from more detailed “stories” in which social and economic issues were explored, towards a series of “tales” published in a series entitled *Illustrations of Political Economy* and aimed at the working classes. Each tale was 130 pages long and sold tremendous numbers of copies for 6d apiece.

Marcet’s *Conversations* was aimed at a very different class than were Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy*. The former saw her natural audience as the bankers, men of affairs and politicians who frequented her parties, despite her stated audience of “young persons”. The latter, by contrast, intended to influence working class behaviour and selected a style of presentation commonly believed superior for reaching those with little time and less formal education. It is telling that, when she chose to reach a similar audience with her *John Hopkins Notions of Political Economy*, Jane Marcet adopted the very successful style of the irrepressible Harriet Martineau.

c. *The Reactions of Political Economists*

Since Jane Marcet insisted on many of J.-B. Say’s insights, it is perhaps not surprising that he valued her work greatly. It is, perhaps, more intriguing since Marcet did not mindlessly conform to classical precepts, that she was as well received by Malthus, Ricardo and others of the English classical school. Malthus’s response is striking because Marcet censored the archive by cutting out those bits that were critical. Polkinghorn notes that in her correspondence there are “about a dozen and a half such letters, all where the writer’s position on a point differed from hers” (1993, 54). Malthus writes:

I own I had felt some anxiety about the success of your undertaking, both on account of its difficulty, and its utility; and I am very happy to be able to say that I think you have overcome the first and consequently insured completely the second... I am much obliged to you for your explanations on rents, and think you have managed some other difficult subjects remarkably well, particularly the subject of exchanges and bill merchants... I will only just observe that I think you have given too much sanction to Mr. Say’s opinion reflecting utility [rest of text missing]—letter from Malthus to Jane Marcet. August 1816. Marcet collection, cited by Polkinghorn (1993, 54).

Notwithstanding the managed archives, the book was well received by Ricardo, Torrens, McCulloch as well as many non-economists in public life, and by the journals (Polkinghorn 1993, 54-56). None, Polkinghorn notes, mentioned the “young persons” to whom the book was supposedly addressed (1993, 56). McCulloch raised a toast to Marcet at a meeting of the Political Economy Club in Edinburgh, and much later wrote that the *Conversations* was “on the whole, the best introduction to the science that has yet appeared” (McCulloch 1845: 18).

Ricardo, like Malthus, drew to Marcet’s attention instances in which she tells a story not entirely in accord with his own, but nevertheless recognized the value of the work in its entirety. He writes to Malthus in 1817:

...Mrs. Marcet will immediately publish a second edition. I have given her my opinion on some passages of her book, and I have pointed out those which I know you would dispute with me. If she begins to listen to our controversy, the printing of her book will be long delayed; she had better avoid it, and keep her course on neutral ground. I believe we should sadly puzzle Miss Caroline, and I doubt whether Mrs. B herself could clear up the difficulty. (Ricardo: cite from CW? Bonar, 132-33)

Support for *Conversations On Political Economy* grew with each edition, drawing more people, both leading economists whose names are still remembered, and their counterparts in the business world, into the conversation.

d. *The “Conversations” in Public Life*

Jane Marcet introduces her *Conversations on Political Economy* with the claim that the book is addressed to “young persons”. Joseph Schumpeter accepted at face value that claim in his authoritative *History of Economic Analysis*, and dismissed the work as fit for “high school girls” (Schumpeter 1954: 477). It was, however, the people in public life with whom the Marcets socialized whom Jane Marcet saw as her natural audience. The success she had in reaching that audience is made evident by the many letters she received from readers across America and Europe thanking her for making an apparently abstruse science comprehensible. To misapprehend that audience is to undervalue the tremendous impact Jane Marcet had in extending the knowledge of classical political economy in the nineteenth century, well beyond those acquainted with the great political economists, to members of Parliament and to the educated classes more generally. She was not writing for the working classes, as was Harriet Martineau, and while she would be pleased to attract young persons to a study of political economy, she was not writing primarily for their benefit either. Her *Conversations* was aimed at women and men of the educated classes. Because the book was written in English, her primary market was in Great Britain and America. Soon, however, the work was translated into French, German, Dutch and Spanish, widening that market to most of Europe. Even if we set aside the liberal “borrowing” from Marcet’s *Conversations* by other popularizers at home and abroad, her reach was profound.

Many certainly hoped that Marcet would reach this market. TB Macaulay wrote in 1825 that “every girl who has read Mrs. Marcet’s little dialogues on political economy could

teach Montagu or Walpole many lessons on finance” (Macaulay 1851: 3). Perhaps most telling is the reaction of the great popularizer Henry Brougham to Marcet’s *Conversations*: “I have read – tho’ not through – with great admiration. It will do a great deal of good...” (letter to Jane Marcet (nd), quoted in Polkinghorn 1993: 55). That the principle of the *Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* should be so extravagant in his praise suggested that Marcet had captured the requisite style. August de la Rive recognized, in his 1859 article on Marcet for the *Bibliothèque universelle de Genève*, the phenomenal publishing success of her venture, a claim that was reiterated by Kenneth Carpenter in his *Economic Bestsellers Before 1850*.

Recognizing better than Schumpeter the true nature of Marcet’s audience, de la Rive quotes one letter from Lady Ann Romilly (wife of the legislator and jurist Sir Samuel Romilly) to Maria Edgeworth:

Haven’t you been delighted by Mme. Marcet’s book? What an extraordinary work for a woman! Everyone who knows the subject is astonished, and people like me who understand nothing about it, or next to nothing, are delighted by the knowledge they have gained from it. One of our former judges who at 83 reads everything that comes out was impressed and truly regrets that he didn’t know everything this book taught him when he was still presiding on the bench. How fortunate it would be for the country if our judges, not to mention our statesmen, knew half of what this work contains. You may say that this is a rather bold statement, but I assure you that is not merely my opinion. (de la Rive, 1859: 13).

Marcet’s *Conversations on Political Economy* gave new impetus to a fashion already well established, as did her *Conversations on Chemistry*. It would be unwise, however, to assume that she was writing only for the entertainment of society women, just as it would be wrong to assume “high school girls” were her primary market. One need only follow John Stuart Mill on his adventures in Parliament to realize that many with whom he debated were gleaning their primary knowledge of political economy not from the works of John Stuart Mill or Ricardo, but rather from those of Jane Marcet. She wrote a simple primer for adults that gave less a definitive and authoritative account of the latest developments in political economy, than the basic principles illustrated by ready examples presented in a coherent fashion.

VI: Extending the Audience

In all of the examples considered to this point, the primary impetus to communication was a desire on the part of Jane Marcet to clarify the conversation and to bring the insights of political economy to a larger audience that she thought would benefit. To use a crude metaphor, they exemplify a “knowledge-push” model of popularization. In 1833, however, she published a book that was based on a very different metaphor: *John Hopkin’s Notions on Political Economy*. This book was created in response to a demand from outside the profession; Marcet’s task was to gather the information necessary to meet the need, package it in an effective form, and deliver it to those who formulated the demand in the first place. This book was based on a “demand-pull” model.

Marcet claimed, in her *Conversations on Political Economy*, that she did not favour teaching political economy to the lower classes (Marcet 1829, 119 – cite to first ed.). But times had changed. In the autumn of 1830, agricultural riots had broken out in various parts of the country. The Romilly family, into which one of Jane's daughters had married, owned an estate in Glamorgan in South Wales (Polkinghorn 1993, 98). They, and many of their neighbours, feared that the English riots would spread to that area and, in 1831, several formed "The Society for the Improvement of the Working Population in the County of Glamorgan". Marcet's son-in-law approached her to write stories for the Society in which the principles of economics could be illustrated for the working population.

In October 1831, supporters of the parliamentary Reform Bill, then under debate in Parliament, and representatives of the city government, confronted one another in the Bristol Riots. After several public buildings were attacked and set afire, the city magistrates called in the cavalry to restore order. The fear of revolution, and particularly civil unrest in London, was very real.

Conversations On Political Economy was never intended as a text for the working classes. One of its ardent supporters, however, was Henry Brougham. He persuaded Jane Marcet to allow his "Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge" to publish her *Popular Introductions to Natural Philosophy* (1829), based on her *Conversations on Natural Philosophy* (1819). It was, so to speak, a popularization of a popularization. He was instrumental in convincing Marcet to expand the tales she had written at her son-in-law's urging and publish, through his own society, *John Hopkin's Notions on Political Economy*. The purpose of the book was to demonstrate the natural harmony of society, and to teach the poor that their best interests are met in cooperation with the monied members of society. Three themes were central to the book: the harmony of interests between classes, the determinants of wages, and the effects of the Corn Laws.

These tales are interesting for a number of reasons. First, the method of exposition is dramatically different from Marcet's *Conversations*. In fact, her tales are similar in form to Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34), which both women deemed a better method of reaching the lower classes. Both women were writing as contemporaries, and they were friends. Martineau claimed to have based her tales on Marcet's *Conversations* among other sources. Both were acutely aware of audience. Second, although *John Hopkin's Notions* was addressed to the poor, its publication again brought Marcet accolades from professional political economists, most notably Malthus. The book was reviewed by a number of publications including the *Edinburgh Review*, *American Monthly Magazine*, *Dublin University Magazine* and others (Polkinghorn 1993, 106-8). Marcet noted that "My John Hopkins has had a very unlooked for success among the great P.E.'s...." (letter to Frank Marcet, 8 February 1833, cited Polkinghorn 1993, 108).

John Hopkin's is, of all Marcet's writing, that book best described as "mere capitalist propaganda" and has, perhaps as a consequence, attracted a good deal less attention from historians than her *Conversations On Political Economy*. If, however, we take seriously

the claim that Marcet was a significant knowledge broker of the first half of the nineteenth century, then *John Hopkin's* becomes central to the story because it is the best instance in which Marcet used political economy to answer questions posed by others, for the direct purpose of addressing very real social problems. The exercise was motivated not by Marcet, and not by the great P.E.s, but rather by those who would ultimately use the knowledge to quell political unrest.

It is with this book that Marcet becomes a true knowledge broker.

VII. Conclusion

Jane Marcet, the great nineteenth-century popularizer of political economy, presided at the centre of a vast social and intellectual web. Her task was networking, as was that of the entrepreneur celebrated by her admirer Jean-Baptiste Say. Networks transmit many kinds of information at the same time, and the information flows in all directions. Marcet's network created social connections among the great Political Economists at home and on the continent, and between those economists and the banking, finance, political and business classes that were represented at her parties. At the same time that social ties were consolidated, intellectual connections were established. Marcet was not outside this process. Part of her task was confronting "the great P.E.s" with dissonant perspectives. While Malthus and Ricardo debated with one another over the Corn Laws at Marcet's home, other debates were introduced in Marcet's books. Say's value theory, not consistent with English classical economics, nevertheless found its way into her *Conversations* and stayed there throughout its publication history, notwithstanding the efforts of Malthus and Ricardo to offer corrections. In a world where her *Conversations* would go on to have a much broader readership than any of the productions of the great P.E.s, this was a challenge.

Envisioning Jane Marcet as a knowledge broker, rather than a popularizer or teacher, makes this information flow central to her work. Historically, she rests between the great female-led continental *salons* of the eighteenth century and the professional knowledge brokers of the twentieth. In the nineteenth century, Marcet helped to define the field.

It is an error to examine Marcet looking for original insights or neglected intellectual contributions to the science of political economy. No one can be an expert in half a dozen fields. But knowledge brokering is portable. That focus explains how she could have such a significant impact on so many fields of study.

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