

Alberto Alesina – a global talent who never forgot Italy

by Vincenzo Galasso, Andrea Goldstein and Giuseppe Nicoletti

A professor in the United States since 1987, first at Carnegie Mellon for less than a year and then at Harvard, where he had obtained his doctorate just two years earlier, Alberto Alesina was first of all a world-renowned economist whose writings have collected more than 120,000 quotes (google scholar). But he also maintained close professional and intellectual ties with Italy and with Italian economists.

The list of Alesina's Italian co-authors is very long. Of his 142 articles published in academic journals since the first – which he published before graduating in *Economia pubblica* in 1980 – more than half are the result of collaboration with other Italian economists, including many doctoral students, such as Silvia Ardagna, Eliana La Ferrara, Enrico Spolaore and Francesco Trebbi. All of them are Bocconi alumni, as were other co-authors – for example Carlo Favero, Paola Giuliano, Vittorio Grilli, Andrea Ichino, Roberto Perotti and Paolo Pinotti – not forgetting of course Francesco Giavazzi and Guido Tabellini who have been teaching in Bocconi for years. Alesina returned regularly to the alma mater, being since 1993 a fellow of IGIER (Innocenzo Gasparini Institute for Economic Research), the centre established in 1990 to contain the “brain drain” and bring to Italy economists from all over the world. During the seminars held in Bocconi it was common to listen to his comments, witty, funny and always constructive – especially towards PhD students and young colleagues.

Overall, 42 Italian economists have published with Alesina in 40 years, most of them spent overseas. His latest book, *Austerity: When It Works and When It Doesn't*, winner of the prestigious Hayek Book Prize from the Manhattan Institute just

a week ago, is also the result of collaboration with Favero and Giavazzi. With the latter, Alesina has written 137 editorials in *Corriere della Sera* since 2011, spanning a variety of themes, always with a strong penchant for provocation, but always with a constructive spirit – “in the interest of the citizens”, as his last contribution, which appeared on May 10th, was titled.

As Silvia Ardagna and Eliana La Ferrara have recalled on *il Sole24ore*, his intellectual curiosity pushed him on many different frontlines, from macro-economics to inequality, social capital and culture. But his main field remained political economics: the study of the economic and political motivations that underlie the behaviour of decision-makers (ministers, governments, parliaments, central banks) and their public policy choices. A new strand of economic science that he and other scholars had helped to create. When the Swedish Academy decides that it is time to award the Nobel Prize in Economics to political economics scholars, it will be very strange not to see his name among the winners.

His interest in Italian affairs was reflected in many of his scientific works dealing with general economic issues, but of great relevance to Italy: from public debt to austerity policies, from bureaucracy to the impact of family ties on the functioning of the labour market and gender gaps. During the meetings of the NBER (National Bureau of Economic Research) Political Economy group in Boston, he liked to point out that it was no coincidence that so many political economists were Italian. Researchers love to study what doesn't work, and in Italy the relationship between politics and economics has not been smoothly functioning.

Alesina transferred his ideas into the public debate through his editorials (often with Francesco Giavazzi) and his books. Editorials sometimes lashing, never trivial, that generally requested a change of direction to Italian politics often accused of too timid an approach when it comes to economic

reforms. To a country historically reluctant to fully accept the rules of the market, he never stopped reminding, in both scientific research and newspaper columns, the importance of healthy competition among firms for promoting investment and growth. He advocated the need for more competition as well for a simplification in public administration and regulation, especially in traditionally protected sectors of the Italian economy, such as public services and liberal professions, where the productivity gap vis-à-vis other countries bears on Italian relative performance. Competition always invoked by those who try to understand the root causes of the Italian evil and often disregarded by Italian policy-makers, as in the case of Law 99 of 2009 that requires the government to propose every year to Parliament measures aimed at promoting it. A provision first complied with six years after its approval and then immediately forgotten, Alesina and Giavazzi wrote on July 10, 2017.

Europe and the Euro were also enticing topics for Alesina, who in 2010, together with Giavazzi, had edited a NBER volume for the ten years of the common currency. In quiet times, they argued, the benefits (and costs) of the euro are important. But during a crisis, the benefits appear magnified. Words that still sound very current today.

Alberto Alesina's biography is an example of how it is often sterile to talk about brain drain and brain gain, when in fact the circulation of talents can enrich nations and make sense of globalization.

* This is the English translation of "Alesina, l'economista di Harvard che non perse mai di vista l'Italia", *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 26 May 2020.