

## *In ricordo di Alberto Alesina (1957-2020)*

Alberto loved opera and always savored a great performance with *gusto* - even that time at La Scala, when Susan and he learned that their beautiful townhouse on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston was threatened by fire (fortunately, everything ended well). Thus, I always thought of him as *Il Maestro* in the Verdian tradition, and expected that, like Verdi, he would continue to provide us with masterpieces and inspiration into his old age, for decades to come. Deep inside, I still believe that. It is too hard to accept that, instead, like Bellini (whom he also loved), he has left us so prematurely.

I first met Alberto thirty years ago at Harvard, where he had received his Ph.D. in Economics in 1986, and had returned as faculty, after a couple of years at Carnegie-Mellon. He was already deservedly famous. In 1988, *The Economist* had presciently picked him as one of the decade's eight best young economists, as he was transforming the way we approach macroeconomics and economic policy by explicitly bringing politics into the analysis. In his influential contribution to the *NBER Macroeconomics Annual 1988*, he had forcefully stated that "social planners do not exist." Economists should not just assume that governments would implement optimal policies (presumably following the economists' own recommendations). Instead, we should strive to understand actual policies as resulting from the strategic interactions of partisan politicians with each other and with the public, and often leading to socially inefficient outcomes.

As a graduate student, who had grown up in Italy during the turbulent 1970s and 1980s, I was fully convinced by Alberto's message. I eagerly took his graduate course on political economy (the first time he taught it, I believe), and wrote my dissertation under his supervision. Thus, I was among the very first in a long line of Harvard students who have enjoyed the extraordinary privilege of having Alberto as their main advisor. As all of us will tell you, Alberto's secret as a mentor was that he invariably treated you as an intellectual peer, from the very beginning. I think that his legendary ability to empathize with graduate students and get the best out of them stemmed from the fact that, deep down, he always continued to feel like a graduate student himself, as he never lost the curiosity, humility, and sense of adventure of the young person who is eager to learn new things.

After I graduated in 1993, Alberto and I frequently met (I was then teaching at Boston College). In 1994, over dinner at Harvest with a visitor from Italy (Stefano Micossi), we were talking about reasons why secessionist movements were becoming stronger all over the world after the end of the Cold War. That conversation was the beginning of a co-authorship that changed my life. Alberto and I formalized the ideas that we had started to discuss at dinner, and wrote a paper on the number and size of nations (issued as an NBER working paper in 1995 and published in 1997), later leading to other articles and a book on that topic.

Alberto was concerned that border changes, like many other policy issues, are too often evaluated from extremist and ideological perspectives. In contrast, he believed in the virtues of economic analysis, with its emphasis on choices and trade-offs. In order to understand political borders, one should consider the trade-off between benefits and costs of national size. However, that trade-off

depends not only on economic factors (economies of scale, barriers to international exchanges) but also on diversity of preferences over public goods and public policies (which we modeled in terms of “cultural distance between individuals”). Cultural variables and their interactions with economic factors have become prominent in economic research in more recent years, not only theoretically but also empirically, in great part thanks to Alberto’s own work with numerous co-authors.

In so many instances, Alberto was years or even decades ahead of the profession, because he had a preternatural ability to focus on what really matters in order to understand a complex phenomenon. He would use models and empirical tools only insofar as they could help simplify and clarify real-world problems that he was interested in. And as much as he loved simplicity, his powerful intuition kept him away from misleading simplifications and monocausal explanations. He was fascinated by explanations deeply rooted in history, but he also appreciated that history is not destiny. For instance, while culture affects institutions, institutions and policies can in turn change culture, as he and Paola Giuliano brilliantly discussed in a JEL article. His more recent emphasis on culture and history may appear as a departure from Alberto’s earlier work on macroeconomic policy. And yet, in a deeper sense, it can be viewed as a natural evolution. In his earlier contributions, politicians and voters fundamentally differ in preferences, values, and beliefs. The natural next step for him was to investigate where preferences, values and beliefs come from, and how they can be changed.

Not only he studied culture and institutions, but he himself built new institutions and changed the culture of the economics profession. He did it by being at a center of a dense social network of collaborators and other scholars, working on topics that he found important and, *per favore*, not boring! He would often be a catalyst for further cooperation between his students and co-authors, to whom he would continue to provide invaluable advice and encouragement, as he did when Romain Wacziarg and I started our long collaboration, after having worked with him on the theory and empirics of economic integration and political disintegration.

One of the great institutions that Alberto created is the Political Economy Program at the NBER. I always looked forward to the Program’s meetings (and to its companion meeting on the “Economics of Culture and Institutions,” co-organized by Alberto Bisin and Paola Giuliano), knowing that Alberto and his collaborators would have selected the most intriguing papers and the sharpest discussants, but that he would be the one to ask the best (and often funniest) questions. It will be so hard to attend those meetings without him. And it will be impossible to hear an aria from *Norma* without missing him. *Arrivederci e grazie, veramente grazie*, Alberto.

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