

A Conversation with

Maristella Botticini



Excluding kindergarden, when and why did you decide that you wanted to study economics for the rest of your life?

I arrived to economics in a rather random way. When I was 11, I had never visited any place except a few towns near the village where I was born in northern Italy. While I knew the world only from books, I wanted to become a journalist to travel to many places and tell readers what I was seeing. When I graduated from high school, I wanted to become a physician or a surgeon because I love to take care of people. But in Italy at that time, there were too many physicians and surgeons: there was a significant risk of not finding a job, which I really needed as I do not come from a wealthy background.

Almost by chance I applied to Bocconi University in Milan: I was admitted and I started studying economics for the first time in my life.

In graduate school, who has been the scholar who had the most profound impact on the way you think as an economist?

In answering this question, I have the opportunity to thank my dissertation advisor and mentor: Joel Mokyr at Northwestern University. I had never thought about studying economic history when I arrived at Northwestern, but its department requires one to do so as part of its graduate core curriculum. At first, I was kind of upset: "I did not cross the Atlantic to study economic history! I want to study economics." With this attitude, I went to the first lecture, expecting to be deeply bored by the subject. When the lecture was over, I thought "I just found what I want to study and to do for the rest of my life!!!"

Joel Mokyr has a gift: his enthusiasm for economic history is like an infectious disease. I am currently writing two books, one on Jewish economic history in the past two thousand years, and the other on marriage markets in comparative perspective. I am dedicating these two books to Joel.

You taught Introductory Microeconomics to thousands of BU undergraduates in the past few years. Any lessons to share?

Yes, two "lessons", but first a little background. When I had just started working at BU as an assistant professor, I saw 488 students in front of me as I walked into Morse auditorium: I felt like Russell Crowe in the "Gladiator" when he entered the Colosseum. I looked around and saw many skeptical faces. The students were surely thinking that "economics is deeply boring" and probably wondering "will she be able to teach at all"? At the end of the semester, two comments in the teaching evaluations made me smile: "we love economics!" and "she has a funny accent".

The first comment shows one lesson: if we love what we study, we can make the students excited about any topic or field. This is our best gift to our students---excitement for learning. The second lesson is: *volere, potere*. This is an Italian expression which means, more or less: "if you want something strongly, you can succeed in accomplishing it."

What is special for you about the Economics Department at Boston University?

I know that some, or all, of my colleagues will laugh when they hear this, but I mean every word of it. When I arrived at BU in 1997, I was terrified: I saw distinguished senior scholars and bright junior colleagues. I felt like a little mouse in front of big lions! Over the years, I learned from them: in seminars and faculty meetings, over lunch and even in hallway conversations. I learned what it means to do first-rate research and to build an institution.

For me, the best thing about the department is its collegiality. There is a feeling of being part of a team, each with different tastes or skills but with a common goal to build a great research and educational environment. I thank my colleagues for their generosity and their friendship. The Economics Department at Boston University will always be "my home."

Maristella Botticini has been a highly popular teacher of Principles of Economics at BU, while becoming one of the world's top young economic historians. She will be returning to Italy as a professor next Fall, completing a circle that began there with her economics studies. The economics faculty wish her well in this new endeavour, but hope to have her return Boston to visit us in the years ahead.