

## Alessandra Casella (by Lindsay Gyeongjin Earhart<sup>1</sup>) June 2021

Born and raised in Milano, Italy, Alessandra Casella's academic journey in the United States started in 1982 when, as a junior at Bocconi University, she spent one semester as an exchange student at NYU. Casella instantly fell in love with New York. The freedom and diversity of New York were liberating.

*Everybody was different. Everybody was doing different things. They were completely crazy. It was absolutely wonderful. So, during that semester, I really thought this has got to continue and I have to do this again. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 3.)*

Casella's intellectual curiosity was heavily influenced by her family, the majority of whom had been academics for several generations. That, and a healthy dose of sibling competition, led her to pursue a Ph.D. at MIT after receiving her bachelor's degree from Bocconi University *summa cum laude* in Economics and Social Sciences in 1983.

*You have to keep in mind the competition within the family. My brother had done a master's at Harvard, so I had to do a PhD at MIT because of the obvious reason. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 3 and 4.)*

Lack of good doctorate programs in Italy also made her decision to pursue an academic career in the United States easier. Further, when thinking of different PhD programs, her first contact with the MIT faculty was with Franco Modigliani who supported and motivated her intellectual curiosity.

Yet it was life in Italy, a country of precarious political culture, that led Casella to an emphasis in public economics and political economy.

*If you grew up in Italy—and I think it's true for many other countries, Argentina is another obvious one—you really cannot study economics without asking yourself questions about politics. I mean, they are so clearly interrelated that the idea of being technical economists who ignore everything about how policies are decided just doesn't seem to make sense. So, I think it's really the environment in which we grew up that pushed us towards political economy in general. ... These (Italy and Argentina) are remarkably badly governed countries historically. There must be a reason there. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 3.)*

As a woman coming from MIT with its strong curriculum, Casella recalls the moment of entering the academic job market in 1987 as a high point.

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*The academic job market was certainly my moment, my apex of glory. With the exception of Harvard, I had offers from every school I could dream of. I had offers from Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Columbia, Northwestern, NYU, Brown. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 4.)*

Her craving for freedom and concerns that the stress of publishing as an assistant professor would lead Casella toward more conventional work than she wanted to do made Berkeley—with its reputation as a free-spirit place—the best choice.

Casella came up for tenure six years later, and her case was denied. Looking back, she remembers being caught unawares.

*Tenure reviews are of course, stressful moments. [When] I started my tenure... I was completely unprepared in terms of administrative affairs. I was totally unprepared, I don't remember even writing a statement. I thought this review was actually going to happen the following year. This tells you how unprepared I was. Well, then it turns out that no, it didn't happen the following year. It happened this year, and in fact, it was negative. That took me completely by surprise. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 7.)*

In Casella's opinion, clear-cut tenure cases – both positive and negative – are a minority. She believes that a majority could typically go either way and that a crucial ingredient is a senior person on the faculty who makes your tenure case their mission and passion.

*The other thing about tenure is that to get someone through tenure takes work, not from the person, but from the Committee or whoever wants to promote the person. There has to be someone, one person or more, who decides "I'm going to make this my mission. I really want this person." And you have to evoke strong passions in a sense to have an advocate. I think [in my case] people thought "Oh, sure, she's fine." (Casella, interview with the author, pp. 9 and 10.)*

Still, today, nearly 30 years later, Casella points to the Berkeley Economics Department as a leading academic institution that has been unbelievably successful in putting women in positions of power.

*From Laura Tyson to Christina Romer and of course to Janet [Yellen]. It's just extraordinary, really extraordinary. . . . They're doing something really right. The university must be supporting women. You don't come into those positions if you don't have an institution behind you that is supporting you. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 2 and 3.)*

After leaving Berkeley, Casella accepted a position as an Associate Professor at Columbia University where she later became tenured. She now serves as a professor of Economics and Political Science at Columbia University and a fellow of the National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge), and the Center for Economic Policy Research (London).

Following her early work in international monetary economics, Casella moved to public economics and voting theory. Here, she offered new proposals on how decisions are made in the electoral field. The absence of data led Casella to what was still a non-mainstream technique in Economics at the time: studying decision-making in the laboratory.

*This is how I discovered research work in the lab and developed a passion for experimental economics. This approach was very stimulating because you are the person generating the data that's needed to test your theory. (Allegra Gallizia, Alessandra Casella: Experimentation and Voting Theory, Bocconi University)*

During her academic career, Casella has witnessed many challenges concerning women in economics in both the United States and Europe.

*The social behaviors are very different. From the point of view of the presence of women in economics, I think Europe until very recently was behind the U.S. Whenever I went to a conference in Europe, I very often found myself the only woman in the room when this wasn't true any longer in the US. ... For example, I was having breakfast [at a conference in Europe] and this guy came up to me, one of the people at the conference and he said, "Oh, you know, it was fun, your talk yesterday; it was so refreshing." Refreshing? What do you mean refreshing? I wasn't giving a refreshing talk. I was very serious. It was shocking. This is not the kind of comment I had ever received in the US. I was "refreshing"? Refreshing? I think that Europe had a longer way to go. Now, there are a lot of initiatives. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 9.)*

In particular, Casella suggests a disproportionate sample size between men and women in the economics field as a possible explanation for the gender inequality and male-dominance issues in the economics profession.

*Numbers. I think it's just numbers. Let's say there is this woman. She is fantastic. She is everything you want: great publications, a lot of students, very active, and very interesting topics. So, you go to the senior hiring committee and make your pitch and they say, "Alright, splendid, she's wonderful. She is fantastic, absolutely." But then there is this guy, John, and he is even better because John is the best of the very large sample of men. And she might be the best of a smaller sample of women. Any basic statistics will tell you that the highest order statistics of a bigger sample is going to be higher than the highest order statistics when the sample is smaller. If you're judging on quality, whenever you have a group that is very underrepresented, and you compare the very best to the very best of a group that is much larger, the larger group is favored. And there is no discrimination at all. The underlying talent distribution can be*

*absolutely identical. It's only that the sample is small. So, you end up hiring John just because he is the best from the bigger sample. This is the kind of problem I have experienced that holds minorities back. So, I think the big issue here is just numbers and I hope it's changing. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 10.)*

To overcome this disproportionate male dominance in academia, Casella advocates educating both men and women to overcome both gender inequality issues.

*You really have to educate the men. You have to educate the women to take less care of their house and their children, and the men to take more care of their house and their children. I have no idea how you're going to do that. It's really difficult. It's really difficult. I was listening to a talk by Claudia Goldin who was saying it's a responsibility of the workplaces, to not require a type of commitment that cannot be given by a mother with a small child. Maybe, but in research, you are the person who requires that type of commitment, who gives yourself the commitments. So, I'm not sure. I think that's extremely difficult. (Casella, interview with the author. p. 11)*

As the mother of a daughter who is herself a Ph.D. candidate, Casella offers this advice to young women:

*I don't think it's terribly productive to focus on being a woman. ... You have to try to be free. You have to be daring, you have to understand that you're taking risks. Somewhere, you have to be aware that if you're a minority, you're going to be in a slightly more difficult position. On the other hand, there are good sides, too; you will be noticed more, people will remember you more. It's not always negative. In fact, I think it can be positive many times, but don't overdo it. It doesn't matter so much and it shouldn't matter. Don't fall into self-victimization, that's extremely dangerous. (Casella, interview with the author, p. 11.)*

### **Works Cited**

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